SYNCLUSIVE

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D2.1 Evaluation of the Synclusive Living Labs - quantitative and realist evaluation



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D2.1 Evaluation of the Synclusive Living Labs - quantitative and realist evaluation - A System Approach to Close the Employment Gap and Create a More Inclusive Labor Market for Vulnerable Groups

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Explanation
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ARC Fund	Applied Research and Communications Fund
BG	Bulgaria
CCAT	Coalition Community Action Theory
CES-D	Center for Epidemiologic Studies – Depression scale
CMO	Context – Mechanism - Outcome
CV	Curriculum Vitae
FI	Finland
FIOH	Finnish Institute of Occupational Health
FMCG	Sector on fast-moving consumer goods (Bulgaria)
HR	Human Resources
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMBP	Integrated Model for Behavioural Prediction
IPS	Individual Placement and Support
ISCTE	Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Portugal)
JSSE	Job Search Self-Efficacy
M	Mean
MAXQDA	Qualitative Data Analysis software with AI Integration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NL	The Netherlands
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PHQ	Patient Health Questionnaire
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PT	Portugal
SBB	Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (the Netherlands)
SDA	Sofia Development Association (Bulgaria)
SME	Small and Mediumsized Enterprises
TAITE	Finnish adaptation of the JOB's program, to strengthen job-search skills
TNO	Netherlands Institute for Applied Research (the Netherlands)
UWV	Employee Insurance Agency (the Netherlands)
WP	Work Package

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Statement of originality

This deliverable contains original unpublished work except where clearly indicated otherwise. Acknowledgment of previously published material and of the work of others has been made through appropriate citation, quotation or both.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The Living Lab-specific quantitative and qualitative analyses and country reports were prepared by the research partners of each Living Lab. The chapters of the main report were drafted by the authors based on the Living Lab reports. Microsoft 365 Copilot was subsequently used to help synthesise and condense selected content, improve clarity and readability, and draft the Executive Summary and visual summaries of the CMO configurations. All AI-assisted output was critically reviewed, verified against the underlying reports and analyses, and revised by the authors, who remain fully responsible for the content and conclusions of this report.

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates the implementation and outcomes of the Synclusive ENGINE approach in Living Labs, developed and implemented in four European countries: Bulgaria, Finland, the Netherlands and Portugal. It integrates quantitative outcome analyses with a qualitative realist evaluation approach in order to assess not only whether change occurred, but also how interventions and coalitions worked, for whom, under which circumstances and why.

The Living Labs differed substantially in target groups, intervention packages, labour-market conditions and evaluation designs. Bulgaria focused on jobseekers and employees aged 50 and over and combined digital, green and soft-skills training with career and psychological support. Finland implemented the evidence-based TAITE and IPS coaching for long-term unemployed jobseekers and both Finland and the Netherlands trained supervisors to support employee development. The Netherlands also developed a work-based entry route for migrant women in childcare and developmental-leadership training for supervisors in one childcare organisation. Portugal delivered employability, management and digital-skills interventions for young people across Lisbon, Évora, Lagoa and through a digital platform.

In the quantitative analyses, many findings were not significant. Despite the differences between the Living Labs, the strongest quantitative findings concerned outcomes close to the content of the interventions. TAITE participants in Finland improved in job-search self-efficacy and the coaching had a significant positive impact on their employment. The analysis of the Bulgarian Living Lab showed improvement in Living Lab-specific digital skills when jobseekers and employees were analysed together. In the Netherlands, most jobseekers with follow-up information obtained a diploma or relevant certificate and several progressed to work, further training or a work trial. In Portugal, the quantitative findings provided preliminary evidence of a positive change for jobseekers, most notably in Work Ability. Evidence for employees was inconclusive. Finnish supervisors improved in self-efficacy for supporting employee development and preparedness for setbacks in this area. No significant findings were found for the impact of the supervisor training aimed to develop employee talents on supervisors nor employees in the Netherlands.

By contrast, broad outcomes such as general self-efficacy, employee career outcomes and organisational mobility changed less consistently in all the Living Labs.

At coalition level, the realist evaluations of the Living Labs revealed that existing relationships helped collaboration start quickly, but also made coalitions dependent on particular individuals. A concrete shared problem, such as labour shortages, skills gaps or regional vitality, helped partners recognise mutual benefit. Progress was hindered when roles, commissioning and decision authority were unclear. A named coordinator, explicit responsibilities, visible follow-up and practical proposals increased the likelihood that discussion led to implementation. Employer engagement improved when intermediaries absorbed administrative and coordinating work, particularly where small organisations or organisations under staffing pressure lacked time and HR capacity. Coalitions mobilised more readily around the inflow of new staff or jobseekers than around the development of current

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employees, which employers often found costly or difficult to organise internally. Furthermore, reforms, restructuring and political change in the wider institutional environment influenced how coalitions developed.

The realist evaluation also identified recurring individual-level mechanisms. Peer interaction supported normalisation, social support and vicarious learning. However, peer interaction worked this way only where participants felt safe enough to share real difficulties. Practical exercises and visible progress created mastery experiences and strengthened specific confidence. Trainers and coaches who adapted pace and content, built on what participants already knew and gave credible, context-specific guidance strengthened trust and confidence. Therefore, accessible delivery, reliable logistics and responsive guidance reduced participation barriers. Relevance to participants' aspirations or employers' operational needs supported motivation and ownership. These mechanisms were most likely to produce distal employment or mobility outcomes when recognised qualifications, suitable vacancies and paths forward, workplace support, time and organisational capacity were also present. Furthermore, these mechanisms did not work equally for everyone: effects depended on participants' starting position, such as prior experience, confidence and health, and added less for those who already felt experienced or well supported. Where daily operational pressure was high, learned skills and tools were harder to apply in practice, even when participants valued them.

The evaluation of the ENGINE in the Living Labs did not demonstrate the complete vacancy-chain assumption underlying this approach. No Living Lab showed convincingly that employee mobility systematically released positions that were subsequently filled by jobseekers facing barriers. In Dutch childcare, vacancies already existed, so direct inflow did not depend on prior employee mobility. In Finland, weak labour demand constrained employment transitions. In Bulgaria and Portugal, interventions strengthened skills, readiness and networks, but a systematic connection between employee mobility and jobseeker inflow was not demonstrated.

The combined findings support a broader interpretation of the ENGINE. Coalitions can provide implementation infrastructure, interventions can strengthen capabilities, and organisational or institutional arrangements as well as coalition networks can convert these capabilities into real opportunities. The relevant pathway differs by context and may involve direct entry, employee development and retention, strengthened employer capacity, system alignment or, where conditions permit, a vacancy chain.

Sustainability requires more than partners' willingness to continue. Coalition work depends on coordination, mandates, governance, financing, continuity of key staff and embedding in organisational routines or policy agendas. Several continuation arrangements described in the Living Labs were still emerging or intended rather than fully implemented. Conclusions about institutionalisation should therefore remain cautious.

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Key conclusions

Coalition level

- Coalitions are most useful where inclusion requires resources held by different organisations and where coordination improves fit across organisational boundaries.
- A small operational core may be more effective initially than a broad but weakly engaged membership; wider partners can join around concrete activities.
- Employer participation depended on practical relevance and on limiting administrative, financial and supervisory burdens.
- Co-design and iterative learning need explicit resources, direct feedback and clarity about which actors influence which decisions.
- Sustainability requires formal ownership, funded coordination and embedding in routine structures.

Individual level

- Intervention-specific and proximal outcomes were more responsive than broad or distal outcomes.
- Peer learning, practical rehearsal, accessible support and visible progress were recurring mechanisms across interventions.

ENGINE

- The multi-level approach was implemented primarily at the individual level and partly at organizational level.
- Capabilities translated into employment or mobility only when suitable opportunities and organisational conversion conditions were present.
- Employee development may support retention, employability or professional growth even where it does not create a vacancy chain.

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1. General Introduction

The Synclusive project aims to strengthen labour market inclusion for groups facing barriers to employment and career development in Living Labs in four European countries: Bulgaria, Finland, the Netherlands and Portugal. The project is based on a system-oriented ENGINE approach, in which regional coalitions develop and implement tailored intervention packages to promote both the upward or sideward mobility of employees and inflow of jobseekers into employment. This requires interventions at multiple levels, including individuals, employers and the system.

The purpose of this report is to present the results of the Synclusive evaluation across the Living Labs, bringing together findings from the quantitative evaluation and the qualitative realist evaluation approach. The quantitative evaluation focuses on measurable changes among jobseekers and employees, including self-efficacy, skills, other behavioural determinants and employment status. The realist evaluation examines how the ENGINE approach, regional coalitions and intervention packages worked (or did not work) in practice, for whom, under which circumstances and why.

The report builds on the earlier Synclusive deliverables. The State-of-the-art report (D1.1; Ivanova, et al., 2023) identified key challenges, barriers, opportunities, stakeholders and inclusion strategies for labour market inclusion at EU, national and regional levels. The Action Plan (D1.2; Ruokolainen et al., 2024) translated these insights into the design of the ENGINE per Living Lab, including target groups, regional stakeholders, barriers, drivers, solutions and intervention packages. The present report evaluates how these intervention packages were implemented and what outcomes they generated in the different Living Lab contexts.

Together, the quantitative and realist evaluations provide insight into both individual-level changes and the mechanisms through which multi-level, coalition-based interventions contribute to labour market inclusion. The report first outlines the shared theoretical foundations and research questions that guided the ENGINE approach and its evaluation. It then presents the evaluation approach and findings across the Living Labs, while accounting for contextual differences in target groups, intervention packages and regional labour market conditions.

This report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 outlines the shared theoretical foundations of the project, including the ENGINE approach.
- Section 3 describes the overall methods of the quantitative analyses and realist evaluation.
- Section 4 describes the four Living labs, i.e. the coalition building, target groups and intervention packages
- Section 5 presents the quantitative evaluation findings for each Living Lab.
- Section 6 presents the results of realist evaluation approach for each Living Lab.
- Section 7 provides the overarching reflections on the findings in section 6.
- Appendices 1-4 describe the 4 Living Labs.

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2. Shared theoretical foundations and research questions

2.1 Theoretical background

The research questions draw on the ENGINE approach, Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT), the Integrated Model of Behavioral Prediction (IMBP), the capability approach and peer learning. Together, these frameworks help explain mechanisms of coalition functioning, as well as how interventions at organisational and individual levels work.

ENGINE approach

The 'ENGINE' is a systems approach intended to create traction in regional labour markets. Its central assumption is that upward or lateral mobility of current employees releases entry-level positions for prepared jobseekers. The approach combines three elements. First, regional coalitions identify barriers to and drivers of labour market inclusion and co-develop context-specific solutions. Second, multi-level intervention packages target jobseekers and employees, organisations, and the wider regional system. For example, development-oriented leadership supports employee mobility, while skills recognition, matching and peer learning prepare jobseekers to fill the positions this releases. These levels are expected to reinforce one another, linking employee development and mobility to improved labour market access for jobseekers. Third, co-design, co-implementation and peer learning involve stakeholders and participants in developing and delivering relevant, feasible and supported interventions.

Coalition functioning

CCAT is used to analyse regional collaboration. It distinguishes three cyclical stages of coalition development: formation, in which partners define shared goals and procedures; maintenance, focused on participation, resources and implementation; and institutionalisation, in which effective strategies become embedded in organisations or longer-term collaborative structures.

Zakocs & Edwards (2006) identified six factors associated with **coalition effectiveness**:

- formal governance procedures
- strong leadership
- active member participation
- diverse memberships
- collaboration and commitment among member agencies
- group cohesion and relationship-building among stakeholders

These factors guide the analysis of coalition quality, development and sustainability in Synclusive. Coalition functioning is also shaped by contextual conditions (including national and regional conditions), social dialogue, involving negotiation, consultation and information exchange among employers, employees and public authorities. Established structures may facilitate consensus-building and resource mobilisation, whereas less formalised settings may depend more on informal networks and ad hoc collaboration (ILO, 2022; European Commission, 2012).

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Integrated Model of Behavioral Prediction and capabilities

The Integrated Model of Behavioral Prediction (IMBP) provides a theoretical framework for understanding, measuring, and evaluating the behaviour of jobseekers and employees (Figure 1). It supports the consistent measurement and comparison of core concepts across Living Labs, even where their operationalisation differs. In Synclusive, behaviour refers to job-search activities among jobseekers and actions through which employees take on new tasks, roles or responsibilities.

This model includes several key concepts:

- Attitude: Personal evaluation of the behavior as positive or negative.
- Social Norm: Perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior.
- Self-Efficacy: Confidence in one's ability to execute the behavior.
- Motivation: The drive or intention to perform the behavior.
- Capabilities: The skills and knowledge required to perform the behavior.
- Obstacles: Barriers that hinder the performance of the behavior.
- Behavior: The actual action performed.
- Opportunities: External factors that facilitate the behavior

Synclusive assumes that skills and self-efficacy contribute to jobseeker inflow and employee mobility, while other IMBP factors may facilitate or constrain these outcomes.

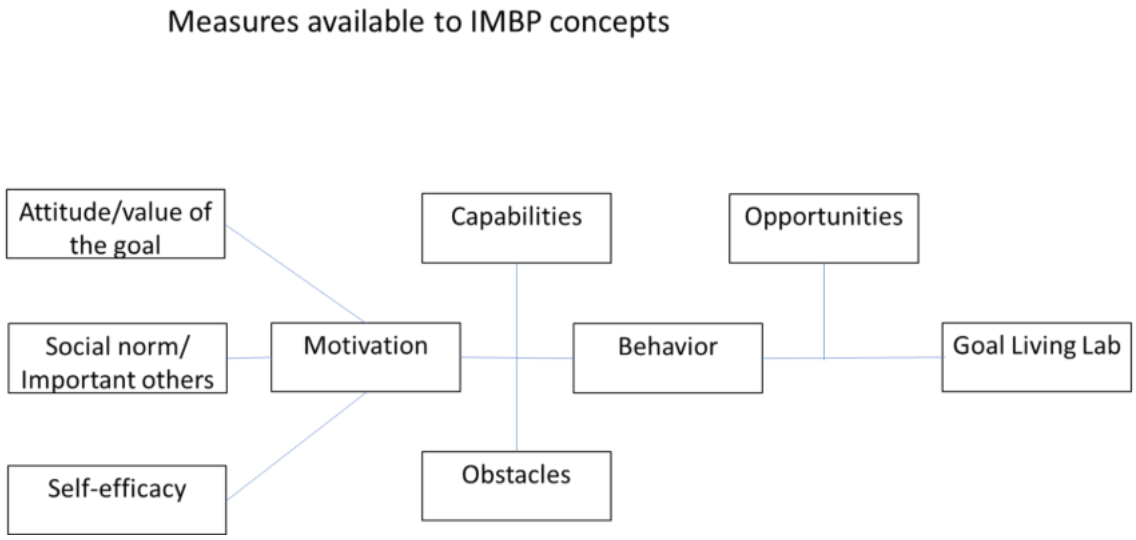

Figure 1 Integrated Model of Behavioral Prediction

Furthermore, the capability approach offers a broader perspective (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017). Whereas IMBP defines capabilities mainly as skills and knowledge, the capability approach concerns people's real opportunities to achieve valued outcomes. It therefore connects individual resources to personal, organisational and structural conditions and highlights that interventions must strengthen both people's resources and their opportunities to use them.

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Therefore in this report, IMBP guides what we measure at the individual level: changes in self-efficacy, skills and related determinants of job-search and role-expanding behaviour. The capability approach guides how we interpret whether these changes become real opportunities, that is, whether qualifications, vacancies, employer practices and workplace support allow strengthened capabilities to convert into employment or mobility.

Peer learning

Peer learning is a central mechanism in the ENGINE. Peer learning enables participants with similar experiences or learning needs to learn with and from one another. It can strengthen skills, self-efficacy and learning confidence, particularly among workers and jobseekers with negative experiences of traditional education (figure 2, Vuori & Vinokur, 2005). The evaluation examines how peer learning was applied, what outcomes it produced and under which conditions it did or did not work.

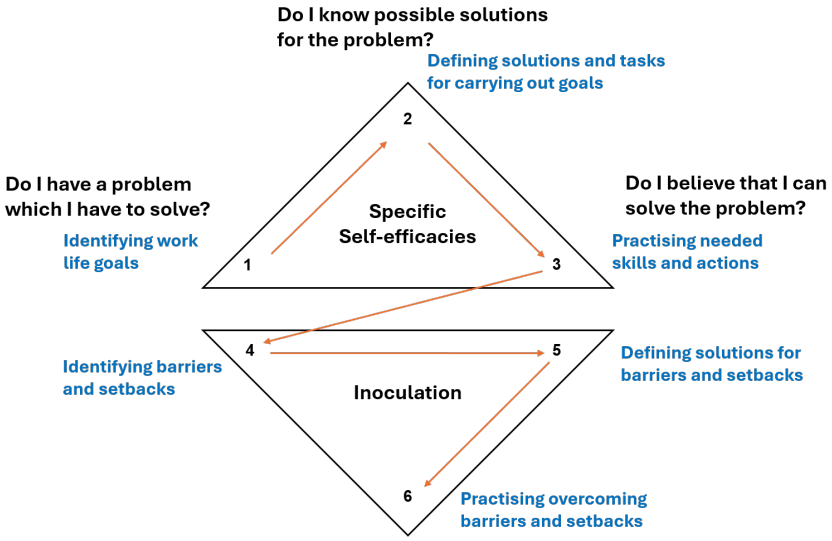

Figure 2 From drivers and barriers towards solutions in job-search (Vuori & Vinokur, 2005)

2.2 Research questions

The evaluation of Synclusive is guided by a combination of quantitative and qualitative research questions. Together, these questions are designed to assess how the ENGINE approach is implemented in practice, how intervention packages work across different contexts, and what this means for coalitions, employees and jobseekers in the Living Labs.

Quantitative evaluation:

1) **Jobseekers:** To what extent do jobseekers experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, as a result of the intervention or intervention package?
2) **Employees:** To what extent do employees experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, following participation in the intervention or intervention package?

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3) **Employment and Mobility effects:** To what extent does the intervention package lead to changes in jobseekers' employment status and in employee mobility within organisations, such as increased employment transitions or shifts in tasks, roles and responsibilities?

Realist (Qualitative) evaluation:
The realist evaluation addresses the following research questions:

- **Coalition-level:**
  Overarching research question*:* "How do regional labour market coalitions work to stimulate upward or sideward mobility among employees facing barriers to progression and create traction for the inflow of jobseekers facing barriers to employment, for whom, and under what circumstances?"
  1. What key mechanisms drive coalition formation and functioning,
  2. Which regional and national contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms, and
  3. What outcomes do these coalitions produce?

- **Individual-level:**
  Overarching research question: *"How do training and development interventions work to stimulate upward mobility and inflow into the labour market of people facing structural barriers to employment or career progression — for whom, and under what circumstances?"*

- **Employees:**
  1. What key mechanisms drive interventions aimed at training and development for employees,
  2. Which contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms, and
  3. What outcomes do these interventions for employees generate?

- **Jobseekers:**
  1. What key mechanisms drive interventions aimed at training and development for jobseekers,
  2. Which contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms, and
  3. What outcomes do these interventions for jobseekers generate?

- **ENGINE implementation question:** How, and to what extent, is the ENGINE approach implemented in practice across the Living Labs, and how do contextual conditions enable or constrain this implementation? In addressing this hypothesis, the evaluation examines how the ENGINE approach takes shape in different contexts through its three core principles:

  1. **Coalition building** is examined by analysing how governance structures, partner composition, leadership processes, member participation, and levels of employer engagement, commitment, and group cohesion shape coalition functioning over time. These elements may function as contextual conditions or as mechanisms, depending on how they influence actors' engagement and collaborative behaviour, and thereby shape whether and how coalition processes associated with the ENGINE approach develop and are sustained.

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2. **Multi-level intervention packages** are examined by analysing interventions targeting jobseekers, employees, organisations, and the regional or system level, with specific attention to the extent to which these levels are aligned and mutually reinforcing, as hypothesised in the ENGINE approach. Particular attention is paid to employee development and upskilling activities and jobseeker activation or matching activities.
3. Third, **co-design and co-implementation** are examined by analysing how these principles are reflected in practice, including the presence and functioning of monitoring and feedback mechanisms, stakeholder involvement in intervention development and adaptation, and opportunities for iterative learning across partners.

3. Overall methods for quantitative and qualitative analyses

This chapter describes the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis across the Living Labs. The evaluation builds on the Synclusive monitoring framework (Sousa et al., 2023) and data-collection approach (Sousa et al., 2024). Analyses were first conducted within each Living Lab and subsequently harmonised to support cross-Living Lab comparison and consortium-level learning, while safeguarding data protection and confidentiality.

The Synclusive research was conducted in accordance with research ethics and data protection principles, following the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity by ALLEA and relevant legislation in each participating country.

For the quantitative evaluation, this process involved:

1. structuring respondent data from each Living Lab in a common format for the D2.1 analyses;
2. cleaning the data and conducting Living Lab-specific analyses;
3. identifying variables to be retained, aggregated or excluded from the pseudonymised datasets; and
4. combining the pseudonymised datasets for later work on policy recommendations, upscaling and indicators

For the qualitative evaluation, findings from each Living Lab were used to develop and refine overarching context–mechanism–outcome configurations, as illustrated in Figure 3.

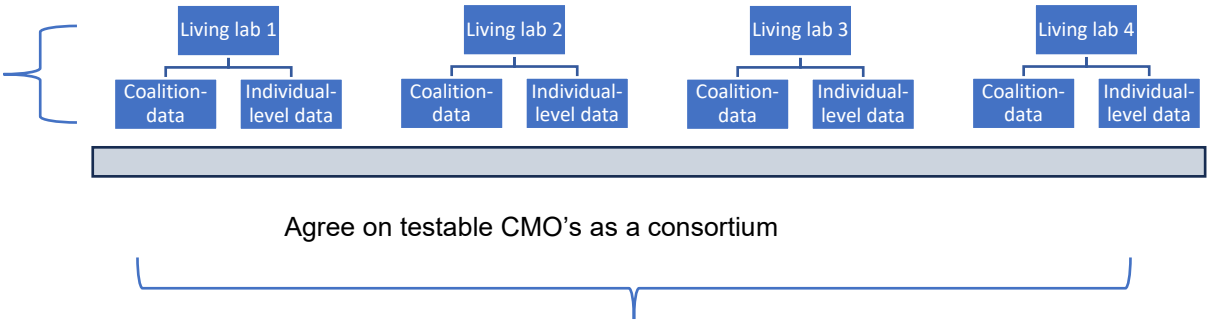

Figure 3 Analysis process of the Realist Evaluation (CMO = Context-Mechanism-Outcome (hypothesis)).

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3.1 Quantitative Data

The quantitative evaluation was based on the Synclusive monitoring framework described in Sousa et al. (2023) and the data-collection approach detailed in Sousa et al. (2024). A common evaluation framework was used across the Living Labs, while data collection was adapted to the timing, target groups and implementation of the local intervention packages. The evaluation examined three broad questions: whether jobseekers changed in self-efficacy, skills and related employment-oriented outcomes; whether employees changed in self-efficacy, skills and related career outcomes; and whether the interventions were followed by changes in employment status or organisational mobility.

Quantitative information served three purposes. First, implementation data described intervention reach, including the numbers recruited, starting, completing and participating in the research. Second, baseline questionnaire data described the study populations in terms of age, gender, education and selected employment-related characteristics. Third, longitudinal questionnaire, programme and register data were used to examine changes after the interventions.

The questionnaires for jobseekers and employees were developed using validated scales, supplemented with questions on participant characteristics and Living Lab-specific outcomes. Where feasible, comparable constructs were measured in both target groups. The jobseeker questionnaire covered participation in learning, barriers to employment, self-reported skills, motivation or career identity, job-search self-efficacy, self-efficacy for intended work, job-seeking activity, job-search attitude, work ability and mental health. The employee questionnaire covered learning participation, barriers to career progression, self-reported skills, current-job self-efficacy, job-progression self-efficacy, career planning, organisational mobility, job satisfaction, work ability and mental health. In the Netherlands and Finland, additional questionnaires assessed supervisors' preparedness and practices for supporting employee learning and career development. In Bulgaria, an additional short questionnaire assessed career outcomes and intervention effects for jobseekers and employees. Table 1 summarises the principal questionnaire domains and their measurement sources.

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Table 1 Overview of common questionnaire domains and measurement sources

Target group	Questionnaire domain	Measurement source
Jobseekers and employees	Personal characteristics	Study-specific questions on gender, age, education and employment characteristics
Jobseekers and employees	Participation in courses and training	Items derived from PIAAC* (PIAAC | OECD)
Jobseekers	Obstacles to work participation	Adapted from the Abilitator; Wikstrom et al. (2020)
Jobseekers and employees	Self-reported skills and qualifications	Wanberg et al. (2002)
Jobseekers	Job-seeking activity	Vesalainen and Vuori (1999); related persistence measures from Wanberg et al. (2005)
Jobseekers	Job-search self-efficacy	Koen et al. (2016)
Jobseekers	Self-efficacy for intended work	Lagerveld et al. (2010)
Jobseekers	Motivation or career identity	Koen et al. (2013)
Jobseekers	Job-search attitude and subjective norm	Van Hooft et al. (2004)
Employees	Barriers to career progression	Adapted from the Abilitator
Employees	Current-job self-efficacy	Adapted from Lagerveld et al. (2010)
Employees	Job-progression self-efficacy	Adapted from Van Hooft (2014)
Employees	Career planning	Koen et al. (2013)
Employees	Organisational mobility	Pearce and Randel (2004)
Employees	Job satisfaction	Meliá et al. (1989)
Jobseekers and employees	Work ability	Tuomi et al. (1994)
Jobseekers and employees	Mental health	CES-D 8; Van de Velde et al. (2010)
Jobseekers and employees	Career changes and intervention outcomes	Living Lab-specific questions employed in Bulgaria
Supervisors	Preparedness and practices for supporting employee development	Living Lab-specific measures used in the Netherlands and Finland

- PIAAC= Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competence: (https://www-oecd.org/en/about/piaac.html)

Scales not available in the required languages were translated from English and back-translated. Consortium researchers discussed discrepancies, and questionnaires were tested with jobseekers and employees before final revisions were made. Data were collected at

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baseline (T0) and at one or more follow-ups (T1 and, where available, T2). Follow-up timing and completeness differed according to local implementation.

3.2 Data preparation and quality assurance

Each Living Lab prepared its data using a common structure and shared cleaning principles (Sousa et al, D4.3). Checks covered respondent identifiers, duplicate records, background variables, skip patterns, coding, value ranges and missingness. Composite scores were calculated when at least 60% of the relevant items had been completed, after recoding negatively worded items. Data from different measurement waves were subsequently merged and linked to intervention participation.

Quality assurance included checks of distributions, missingness, internal consistency and correspondence between derived variables and source data. Living Lab-specific decisions on missing values, outliers and recoding were documented locally. The harmonised structure supported consistent reporting but did not eliminate differences in target groups, interventions, follow-up periods or evaluation designs.

3.3 Quantitative analyses and cross-country synthesis

Analyses were conducted separately within each Living Lab and adapted to the available data and design. Longitudinal analyses examined within-person change and, where suitable comparison data were available, differences in change between intervention and comparison groups.

For jobseekers, Bulgaria, Finland and Portugal conducted paired comparisons among participants with data at the relevant measurement points. The Netherlands did not analyse questionnaire changes because language and literacy barriers limited data reliability; its evaluation therefore focused on programme completion, qualifications, job offers and progression to further training or work trials. Finland also used Employment Services register data to examine changes in employment status.

For employees, Bulgaria and Portugal primarily examined changes among participants who were directly exposed to the interventions (training). In the Netherlands and Finland, employees were indirect beneficiaries of interventions delivered to supervisors. The Netherlands used linear mixed models to compare employees linked to trained supervisors with a waiting-list group. Finland used repeated-measures analyses to compare employees whose supervisors did and did not participate in the training. Supervisor outcomes were analysed separately because supervisors, rather than employees, were the direct intervention recipients. In Bulgaria, the primary paired analyses focused on T0–T1 because of substantial attrition at T2. Exploratory T0–T2 comparisons were additionally reported for the small subgroup with complete longer-term follow-up data. Bulgaria also compared the intervention and control groups at T2. Table 2 summarises the evaluation designs.

Results were reported using means, standard deviations, percentages, changes over time, p-values, confidence intervals and standardised effect sizes, depending on the analysis. Because several analyses involved small matched samples and incomplete follow-up,

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interpretation considered not only statistical significance but also the direction, magnitude, precision and consistency of change, alignment with intervention content, and data source and completeness.

Table 2 Overview of quantitative evaluation designs

Living Lab	Jobseeker analysis	Employee analysis	Comparison information	Main limitation
Bulgaria	Paired changes T0-T1 and T0-T2. Difference-of-means comparison with a control group (at T2 only).	Paired changes T0-T1 and T0-T2. Difference-of-means comparison with a control group (at T2 only).	Control group for jobseekers and employees at T2	Small matched samples,substantial missing follow-up data at T2, not all participants filled out the whole questionnaire
Finland	Paired questionnaire changes and register-based employment transitions	Change compared between intervention and control groups using repeated-measures analyses	Employee control group and register comparison information for jobseekers	IPS survey data could not be analysed; employees were exposed indirectly through supervisors
The Netherlands	Descriptive programme, qualification and progression outcomes	Change compared between intervention and waiting-list groups using linear mixed models	Waiting-list comparison groups for employees and supervisors	jobseeker questionnaires were not reliable; Employees were exposed indirectly through supervisors
Portugal	Paired T0-T1 changes	Paired T0-T1 changes	A jobseeker control group was described, but not used in the reported change analyses	Small employee samples and very limited T2 data

3.4 Design of the Realist Evaluation

Our realist evaluation approach draws on Pawson and Tilley (1997), Butterfoss and Kegler (2002), and the RAMESES II reporting guidelines for realist analyses (Wong et al., 2016). It examines what works, for whom, under which circumstances. This approach is appropriate for Synclusive because ENGINE operates in complex coalition and labour market contexts in which outcomes are expected to vary across settings.

Realist evaluation starts from an initial programme theory, here based on the ENGINE and CCAT. Early interviews developed this theory and later interviews tested and refined it. Shared interview protocols were used across the four Living Labs to examine context–mechanism–outcome configurations at two interconnected levels. At the coalition level,

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interviews with coalition members and training providers addressed governance, leadership, participation, cohesion, trust and collaboration, as well as context factors including labour market conditions, policies and organisational capacities. Theory-testing questions then examined assumptions of the programme theory concerning employer engagement, decentralised collaboration, labour mobility and coalition sustainability. At the individual level, interviews with participants and trainers addressed how interventions strengthened skills, self-efficacy and motivation, and which conditions shaped these processes. The levels are interconnected because coalition conditions shape which interventions are available and whether strengthened capabilities can be used.

At the individual level, interviews with jobseekers, employees, trainers and supervisors addressed personal and structural conditions, mechanisms such as motivation, self-efficacy, skill development and peer support, and outcomes such as confidence, employability and work readiness. The evaluation thereby examined how coalition and organisational conditions shaped individual experiences and outcomes.

3.5 Qualitative Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a structured yet iterative process consistent with realist methodology and RAMESES II recommendations (Wong et al., 2016). Transcripts were initially coded using a context–mechanism–outcome (CMO) heuristic, distinguishing contextual conditions, mechanisms (conceptualised as participants' reasoning and responses), and outcomes. Given variation in interview focus, the dataset was analytically organised into two levels: 1) Interviews with coalition partners, employers, municipal actors, and training providers primarily generate coalition-level data on governance structures, collaboration processes, leadership dynamics, and regional coordination. 2) Interviews with employees, supervisors, and jobseekers yielded individual-level data, capturing personal circumstances, reasoning processes, and perceived outcomes. This structure enables analysis of how coalition-level strategies shape individual experiences, and how individual responses feed back into coalition functioning.

Following initial coding, analysts refined emerging CMO patterns within each level. Coalition-level data were examined for relationships between contextual conditions and mechanisms such as governance, leadership, member engagement, diversity, and cohesion. Individual-level data were analysed to identify how personal and structural contexts trigger mechanisms including confidence, motivation, trust, and perceived behavioural control. Cross-case comparisons were conducted within and across Living Labs to identify recurring patterns and account for contextual variation.

The analysis combined categorisation and connection strategies, identifying discrete C, M, and O elements and examining how these form explanatory configurations. Interpretation was informed by Community Coalition Action Theory at the coalition level and Integrated Model of Behavioral Prediction at the individual level. Iterative comparison supported refinement of CMO configurations, exploration of rival explanations, and adjustment of programme theories. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how mechanisms operate across contexts and phases, informing programme improvement and future upscaling.

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A key preparatory step in the evaluation design was the development of an initial programme theory. During the first project phase, partners across all Living Labs met regularly to discuss early insights from stakeholder engagement activities, including preliminary interviews, exploratory meetings with coalition partners, and observations of emerging interventions. These cross-country exchanges served two purposes: they enabled comparison of emerging patterns across institutional and labour market contexts, and they created a structured space to surface assumptions about how coalitions were expected to function.

In developing the programme theory, the consortium drew on Community Coalition Action Theory, particularly the work of Zakocs and Edwards (2006), to conceptualise mechanisms related to coalition functioning, including leadership, governance, participation, diversity, collaboration, and cohesion. Contextual insights generated within each Living Lab further informed expectations about how these mechanisms might vary across settings. Assumptions about individual responses to training and development were informed by behavioural models, elaborated in the individual-level analysis. The resulting initial programme theory provided a structured articulation of hypothesised pathways and guided the development of shared interview protocols.

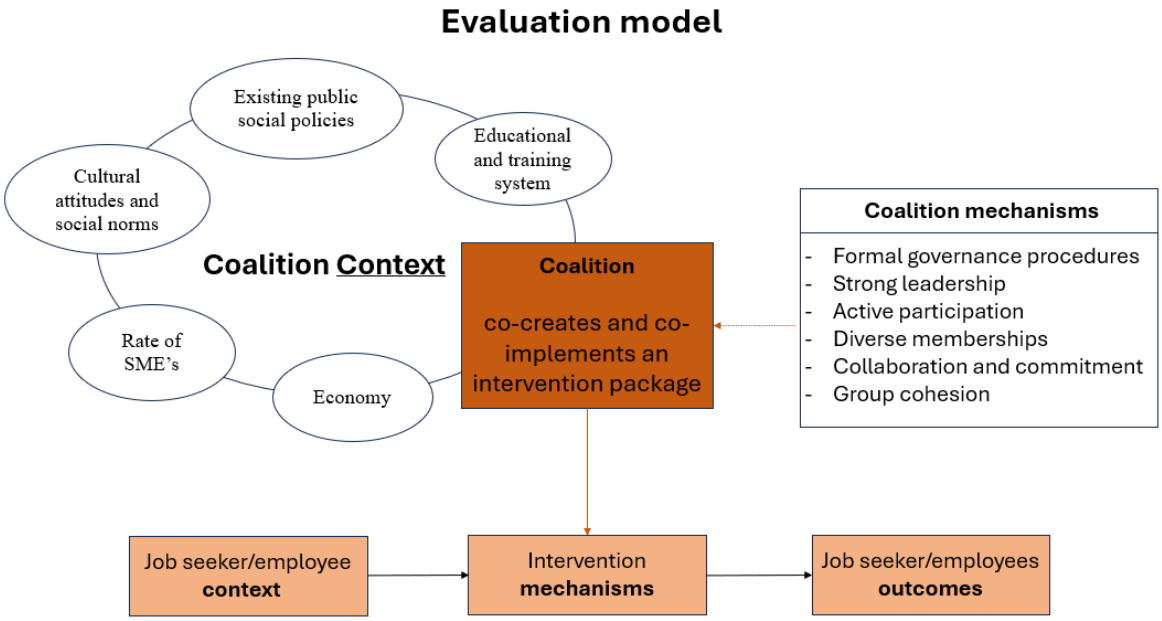

Figure 4 Initial programme theory and evaluation model of the Realist Evaluation

The evaluation design is explicitly theory-driven and adopts a layered context–mechanism–outcome (CMO) structure. At the coalition level, CMO configurations captured how regional actors—such as municipalities, employers, training providers, NGOs and labour market institutions—collaborate to stimulate labour mobility and inclusion. Context included governance structures, policy environments, economic conditions, and institutional capacity. Mechanisms referred to collaborative processes such as leadership, participation, cohesion, and trust. Outcomes included both implementation progress and changes in coalition functioning, such as collective efficacy and strengthened collaboration.

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At the individual level, the model examines how employees and jobseekers engage with intervention activities. Context included personal circumstances and structural opportunities created through the coalition. Mechanisms reflected how individuals interpret these opportunities, including confidence, motivation, perceived behavioural control, and trust. Outcomes included proximal effects such as self-efficacy, skills development, and work readiness, as well as distal outcomes including employment, retention, and mental well-being.

Analysing these two layers in parallel enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how coalition-level strategies shape individual experiences, and how individual responses, in turn, influence coalition functioning. This layered perspective was central to assessing the effectiveness and scalability of the ENGINE approach across Living Labs. Subsequent sections apply this framework to each Living Lab to support comparison, theory refinement, and future upscaling.

4. Description of the Living Labs

In the appendices 1 to 4 the description of the coalition building process, the target group and the design and implementation of the interventions packages are more extensively described for Bulgaria (Appendix 1), Finland (Appendix 2), the Netherlands (Appendix 3) and Portugal (Appendix 4). In this part of the report these sections are included in a shortened way.

4.1 Coalition building in the Living Labs

Bulgaria

The Sofia Living Lab in Bulgaria was coordinated by the Sofia Development Association (SDA) and brought together public authorities, employers, civil-society organisations, social partners and labour-market intermediaries. Regional coalition building required active outreach because Bulgaria already had national employment programmes offering recognised certification and employer incentives. The Sofia Living Lab therefore positioned Synclusive as a complementary regional initiative for people aged 50 and over, combining stakeholder coordination with employability support, employer engagement and awareness raising.

The coalition used existing relationships and included an HR and training organisation to connect skills development with employment opportunities. It operated through a two-tier structure: a core group of SDA, Young Talents 50+ and ARC Fund managed implementation, monitoring and evaluation, while a wider group of public organisations, employers, NGOs, social partners and media contributed to specific activities such as training, career forums and communication with the target group.

Finland

The Finnish Living Lab built on an existing regional network around employment reform in the City of Kokkola. Stakeholders generally knew one another and had established bilateral relationships, providing a foundation of trust. However, at first, the cooperation was relatively unsystematic and focused mainly on case-specific bilateral contacts rather than coordinated multilateral action.

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From late 2025, City of Kokkola's employment services assumed a clearer leadership role and FIOH facilitated a renewed activation phase focused on employment and regional vitality. Workshops were used to clarify the coalition's mission, vision, value proposition, roles, commitment and joint activities, and to establish thematic working groups. A written coalition agreement is in preparation in 2026 to strengthen organisational commitment and stability. The current coalition includes municipal employment and business services, education providers, third-sector organisations, the regional wellbeing service county, entrepreneur associations, and representatives of trade unions and some large employers. The current status of the coalition is based on a multilateral partnership that aims to institutionalise its role while increasing engagement and collaboration and signing coalition agreement.

The Netherlands

The Dutch Living Lab was coordinated by TNO and Tilburg University in cooperation with the Municipality of Amersfoort, building on existing working relationships. Coalition development initially progressed slowly and became concentrated on labour-market inclusion, employee development and retention in the childcare sector.

The coalition connected the municipality, employer services, UWV, childcare organisations, education providers, SBB and labour-market intermediaries. It developed a work-based entry pathway for migrant women and a supervisor intervention aimed at employee development and retention. Interviews with additional childcare organisations informed the intervention design and generated evidence on recruitment, supervision capacity and regional collaboration. Possible extension to other childcare organisations and sectors was still at the level of intentions at the final interview round and should not be interpreted as realised scaling.

Portugal

The Portuguese Living Lab was led by ISCTE and operated through regional settings in Lisbon, Évora and Lagoa, supported by a national Digital Living Lab platform. Public organisations, educational institutions, professional and community organisations and other employment and training actors supported participant recruitment and intervention delivery.

Participation and coalition development differed across the regional settings. Lisbon and Évora included most jobseekers, while Lagoa and Évora included most employees. The predominance of SMEs restricted employers' capacity to offer internal mobility or absorb additional jobseekers. Public organisations, education providers and associations nevertheless provided important entry points for collaboration. Because the nature and degree of formal coalition development varied between the regional settings, the Portuguese case is best understood as a set of regional partnerships rather than one uniformly functioning coalition.

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4.2 The target groups

Bulgaria

The Living Lab in Bulgaria (SofiaLab) initially focused on women aged 55 and over, who face specific barriers including age discrimination, digital-skills gaps and limited participation in lifelong learning. Following discussions with companies and public organisations, the operational target group was broadened to women and men aged 50 and over who were looking for work or considering upward or sideward mobility. Jobseekers and employees could participate in the same training offer, while non-participants were invited to contribute to the control-group evaluation.

Finland

The Finnish jobseeker interventions targeted two groups. TAITE coaching was intended primarily for motivated, long-term unemployed people whose job-search skills and confidence required strengthening. TAITE coaching is the latest Finnish adaptation of the JOBS peer group-based method. The efficacy of the JOBS method has been demonstrated in several randomized controlled trials conducted in different countries (see a meta-analytic review by Liu et al., 2014; a summary of international studies by Vuori & Price, 2015).

The decision to implement Taite-coaching was made by the Employment Services of the City of Kokkola. At the beginning of the Synclusive project, the municipal employment services were particularly seeking research- and evidence-based solutions to strengthen the job search abilities of the long-term unemployed and ultimately improve their employment.

IPS coaching targeted jobseekers facing more complex barriers who needed personalised support before and after employment. Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is an internationally researched, evidence-based employment support method originally developed to promote employment among individuals with mental health conditions. The method emphasises rapid job search with the aim of placing jobseekers in competitive employment as early as possible, followed by the provision of intensive and individualised support once employment has begun. IPS is delivered according to standardised procedures, and method-specific training is available for professionals implementing the service (https://ipsworks.org/index.php/evidence-for-ips/).

A separate intervention targeted supervisors employed by the City of Kokkola. The intended beneficiaries were employees in potentially vulnerable labour-market positions, including those with lower educational levels and limited possibilities in skills development and career advancement. Supervisors were the direct intervention recipients because the organisation lacked a structured approach for supporting competence and career development within teams and work communities.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands the Living Lab targeted migrant women seeking entry into childcare and employees already working in a childcare organisation. For migrant women, language and literacy barriers made questionnaire completion unreliable. The evaluation therefore relied primarily on interviews and programme and implementation information.

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For employees, the intervention focused on career development, sustainable employability and retention. Employees were indirect beneficiaries: the developmental-leadership training was delivered to supervisors, who were expected to strengthen developmental conversations and support workplace learning and career development.

Portugal

The Portuguese Living Lab targeted jobseekers and employees with different ages, education levels and employment positions. The groups were identical across the Portuguese Living Labs. Quantitative dataset included 222 jobseekers and 73 employees. Jobseekers were generally younger and more educationally diverse, whereas employees were more often highly educated. This heterogeneity, combined with differences between the four regional settings, should be considered when interpreting aggregated Portuguese outcomes.

4.3 From drivers and barriers to solutions and prioritisation towards development and implementation of the intervention package

Bulgaria

The Living Lab in Sofia developed an integrated intervention package for jobseekers and employees aged 50 and over. The package combined digital, green and soft-skills training with psychological support, career counselling, job-search assistance, employer engagement in training activities and meetings with jobseekers, and public awareness activities addressing age-related stereotypes. The training was free of charge and delivered in a hybrid format, allowing participants to attend online or in person. Participants could follow one or more components according to their starting position, learning needs and career aspirations.

The training addressed both technical and personal skills. Digital and green-skills components responded to changing labour-market requirements, while soft-skills training and additional support focused on self-assessment, adaptability, confidence, financial literacy and practical job-search skills. The mixed-group format brought together jobseekers and employees, creating opportunities for peer learning, exchange of labour-market information, social contact and mutual encouragement.

This integrated design was particularly relevant in a context of age-related exclusion and concerns among participants that their skills had become outdated. However, general skills and stronger confidence did not automatically result in employment or mobility. Their labour-market value also depended on recognised occupational qualifications, suitable vacancies, employer demand and effective matching between participants' diverse professional backgrounds and available opportunities. Detailed intervention activities and the implementation schedule are presented in Appendix 1.

Finland

The Finnish intervention package responded to barriers at individual and (public) employer levels. Long-term unemployed jobseekers frequently faced weakened job-search confidence, outdated skills, health or work-ability limitations and fragmented support. At employer level, the predominance of micro-enterprises restricted recruitment, onboarding, workplace support and internal mobility.

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Employment services introduced two evidence-based approaches for jobseekers. TAITE coaching is a peer group-based coaching that focused on strengthening job-search skills, job-search self-efficacy, mental wellbeing and preparedness for setbacks in job-search through realistic exercises, feedback and peer learning. IPS coaching was intended for participants facing more complex barriers and combined individual job coaching with rapid job search, financial counselling and continued support for jobseekers and employers.

FIOH trained seven job coaches to facilitate TAITE groups. Between 2024 and 2026, these coaches delivered a total of 13 TAITE coaching groups in Kokkola. IPS implementation, in turn, did not proceed as intended. Staff turnover among job coaches, increasing of unemployment, competing statutory responsibilities and limited resources reduced intervention exposure, employer outreach and evaluation possibilities. The intervention was discontinued after six months. This implementation experience is important when interpreting the limited IPS results: it does not provide a test of a fully implemented IPS model.

The Living Lab also explored employee mobility with two large employers. These employers withdrew before implementation because of organisational reforms, resource constraints and other collaborations. The City of Kokkola subsequently participated as an employer, and FIOH and the municipal HR department developed the Guiding Skills and Development coaching programme for supervisors. This intervention focused on workplace learning, competence development, developmental discussions and career advancement. Its aim was to strengthen supervisors' self-efficacies in supporting the skill and career development of their employees as well as supervisors' abilities to solve potential challenges related to these themes. The intervention was expected to first bring about changes in supervisors' abilities, confidence, and practices, which, in turn, were expected to promote positive outcomes among employees.

The Netherlands

The intervention package in the Netherlands addressed both labour-market entry and employee development in childcare. For jobseekers, the coalition developed a work-based pathway for migrant women interested in entering the sector. Recruitment through neighbourhoods and local communities was combined with workplace experience, Dutch-language development, coaching and vocational training. This approach aimed to reach women who were not always accessible through conventional recruitment channels and who did not yet meet the formal requirements for pedagogical positions.

Participants could enter childcare through assistant roles and gradually develop the language skills, occupational competencies and qualifications required for progression. The pathway offered routes towards partial certificates or a full vocational qualification. It therefore connected individual capability development to workplace learning and a recognised qualification route in a sector with direct labour demand. At the same time, implementation depended on employers having sufficient capacity for supervision and on partners agreeing on responsibilities, financial conditions and support across placements.

For employees, the Living Lab developed developmental-leadership training for supervisors. Employees were the intended beneficiaries but were not the direct intervention recipients. The training addressed developmental conversations, career planning, workplace

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learning, role clarity and supervisors' responsibility for supporting employee development and retention. This indirect design is relevant when interpreting the results: changes were expected to occur first in supervisors' awareness, confidence and practices and only subsequently in employee outcomes.

The intervention package was developed and refined iteratively using questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with employees, supervisors and management. These feedback cycles helped identify barriers related to supervisory capacity, psychological safety, organisational roles and the visibility of development opportunities. They also informed adjustments to the intervention and generated lessons for possible future implementation within childcare and other sectors.

Portugal

The Portuguese intervention package aimed to strengthen employability, professional development and adaptability among jobseekers and employees. It covered three broad areas: employability skills, management skills, and digital skills and productivity tools. Activities included training in job-search preparation, entrepreneurship, business models, digital applications and technical skills. Delivery combined face-to-face, online and hybrid formats.

Interventions were implemented through regional settings in Lisbon, Évora and Lagoa and through the nationwide Digital Living Lab (see Appendix 4). The economic and institutional contexts differed considerably. Lisbon operated in a relatively urban, academic and technology-oriented environment; Évora connected training to sectors such as agriculture, commerce and aeronautics; and Lagoa had stronger links to tourism, services and entrepreneurship. The Digital Living Lab supported online delivery and provided pedagogical materials for the physical Living Labs.

Participation also differed between the regional settings and between jobseekers and employees. Jobseekers included young people moving from education into work, unemployed people attempting to re-enter employment and participants reconsidering their occupational direction. Employees generally participated to acquire technical or digital skills, prepare for future responsibilities or strengthen their professional adaptability.

Across settings, the intervention resources included practical exercises, trainer guidance, peer interaction and links between course content and possible professional applications. The mechanisms and outcomes nevertheless varied according to participants' profiles and delivery conditions. Hands-on activities and visible outputs were particularly relevant to employees' sense of mastery, while jobseekers' participation depended more strongly on reliable logistics, accessible support and the perceived relevance of training to realistic career pathways. Regional variation and heterogeneous participant profiles therefore limit interpretation of the Portuguese activities as one uniform intervention package. Detailed regional designs and activities are presented in Appendix 4.

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5. Quantitative results of the Living Labs

In this paragraph we present a comparative overview of the quantitative findings of the Living Labs in Bulgaria, Finland, the Netherlands and Portugal. A more detailed description of the quantitative findings is presented in Appendix 1 (Bulgaria), Appendix 2 (Finland), Appendix 3 (the Netherlands) and Appendix 4 (Portugal).

5.1 Participation in interventions and quantitative research

Intervention reach and research participation varied substantially between the Living Labs. Portugal reported the largest direct intervention groups (Table 3). Bulgaria involved smaller groups but reported high completion rates among unique participants, although T2 responses dropped significantly in both Portugal as well as Bulgaria. Therefore, the matched analyses in these countries compared T0 and T1 only. Data collected from a separate control group were compared to the T2 data collected in Bulgaria. Finland reached jobseekers through two coaching approaches, although only the TAITE questionnaire data were sufficiently complete for analysis. In the Netherlands and Finland, employees were surveyed as potential indirect beneficiaries of supervisor training. Research participation among supervisors varied across measurement waves.

Table 3 Participation in interventions and quantitative research

Living Lab	Population	Started intervention	Completed intervention	Participated in quantitative research: T0-T1-T2
Bulgaria	Jobseekers	36	33	T0: 28; T1: 21; T2:9
Bulgaria	Employees	58	48	T0: 38; T1:24; T2:15
Finland	Jobseekers: TAITE	79	Not available	T0: 71; T1: 59; T2: 35
Finland	Jobseekers: IPS	19	Not available	T0: 9; T1: 1; T2: 0
Finland	Employees	Not applicable: intervention delivered through supervisors	Not applicable	T0: 185; T2: 130
Finland	Supervisors	37	35	T0: 29; T1: 22
Netherlands	Jobseekers	29	21	T0:6
Netherlands	Employees	Not applicable: intervention delivered through supervisors	Not applicable	Intervention: T0: 65; t2: 46 Control:T0:41; T2:18
Netherlands	Supervisors	15	14	Intervention: T0:11; T1:9; T2:6 Control: T0:4; T1: 8; T2: 6
Portugal	Jobseekers	387	297	T0:221; T1:89; T2:10
Portugal	Employees	181	181	T0:67; t1:19; T2:2

* The responses varied by concept or variable used. In order to have an idea of the responses we used the average T0-T1-T2 response on (job-search) self-efficacy in each country.

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5.2 Participant characteristics

The participant groups reflected distinct national and sectoral target populations (Table 4).

Jobseekers. Bulgarian participants were aged 50 and over, predominantly women and generally highly educated. Portuguese jobseekers were younger and more educationally diverse. Most (174 of 221) were young people aged 16 to 34. Finnish TAITE participants had a broader age range, a relatively balanced gender distribution and mostly intermediate education. IPS participants are not included because the sample was too small for quantitative analysis. The Netherlands specifically targeted migrant women seeking entry into childcare, but reliable questionnaire-based background data were not available for this group. This group was therefore evaluated mainly on training completion, qualifications and employment or further-training outcomes, complemented by qualitative data.

Differences were also apparent among employees and supervisors. In the Netherlands, baseline characteristics were reported separately for intervention and waiting-list employees and supervisors.

Employees. In Bulgaria and Portugal, employees took part directly in the training. In the Netherlands and Finland, they were reached through their supervisors, whose participation defined the intervention and control groups. In the Netherlands, the employee groups were similar in gender, but the intervention group was somewhat younger and more often higher educated. In Finland, employees were divided into intervention and control groups for the change analysis, but the country report presented baseline characteristics only for the total employee sample.

Supervisors. In the Netherlands and Finland, supervisors received the intervention themselves. In the Netherlands, supervisors at locations that received the training later formed the waiting-list group. Finnish supervisor characteristics were reported only for supervisors participating in the intervention.

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Table 4 Selected baseline characteristics of jobseekers, employees and supervisors

Living Lab	Population	N	Mean age	Women	Basic education	Intermediate education	Higher education
Bulgaria	Jobseekers, intervention group	28	58.0	89.0%	0.0%	32.1%	67.9%
	Employees, intervention group	38	59.0	89.0%	0.0%	15.4%	84.6%
Finland	Jobseekers, TAITE intervention group	71	38.9	43.7%	9.9%	66.2%	21.1%
	Employees, total sample	185	47.5	81.0%	4.9%	30.3%	64.3%
	Supervisors, intervention participants	29	39.1	86.2%	0.0%	24.1%	75.9%
Netherlands	Jobseekers Not reliably available	23	Not reliably available	100% women by target-group definition	Not reliably available	Not reliably available	Not reliably available
	Employees, intervention group	65	41.1	97.7%	3.5%	64.0%	32.6%
	Employees, waiting-list group	41	43.7	98.0%	0.0%	74.5%	25.5%
	Supervisors, intervention group	11	38.3	100.0%	Not available	Not available	Not available
	Supervisors, waiting-list group	4	38.6	100.0%	Not available	Not available	Not available
Portugal	Jobseekers	221	28.6	68.5%	22.4%	43.8%	33.8%
	Employees	69	39.9	63.0%	1.4%	27.5%	71.0%

Note: like in table 3, we used the response on the (job-search) self-efficacy scale to provide the 'n', because of variation in response to different scales.

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5.3 Results for jobseekers

Despite differences between the findings in the Living Labs, overall positive developments were observed in jobseekers' transitions towards employment, qualifications and further training (table 5).

Finland contributed register-based follow-up information, the Netherlands reported programme and progression outcomes, and Bulgaria and Portugal provided follow-up information on employment and training. Together, these findings show that participants progressed towards greater labour-market participation in different ways.

Bulgaria reported positive employment outcomes, but follow-up information was available for only 13 of the 33 jobseekers who completed an intervention. Eight of these 13 had found employment, while only two respondents to the separate short questionnaire explicitly stated that the intervention had helped them find a job.

In Finland, the proportion of TAITE participants registered as unemployed declined from 78.6% before the intervention to 48.6% four months later. Individual-level analysis classified 34% as having made a positive transition, including transitions into paid work, training or employment-promoting services. At the four-month follow-up, 85.5% of the control group participants remained unemployed.

In the Netherlands, 20 of the 23 jobseekers with follow-up information obtained a diploma or relevant certificate, six were offered a job at the participating childcare organisation and twelve entered another training programme or work trial.

Portugal had only eight follow-up cases with employment at T2. However for perceived work ability the T0-T1 increase in the matched sample of jobseekers was significant. The Bulgarian and Portuguese percentages therefore cannot be generalised to all participants.

Job-search self-efficacy was the most consistent positive common questionnaire outcome. It increased statistically significantly for the group for whom the data matched over the repeated measures in Finland after TAITE coaching. Bulgaria showed a favourable but non-significant change at the conventional 5% threshold. Portugal showed a small, non-significant change as well.

For general self-efficacy, generic skills, motivation and job-search attitude, most countries reported no statistically significant change. Portugal reported a statistically significant increase in perceived work ability among matched jobseekers comparing T0 with T1. Bulgaria found statistically significant improvements in Living Lab-specific digital skills when jobseekers and employees were analysed together. These combined findings cannot be attributed separately to jobseekers.

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Table 5 Main findings for jobseekers.

Outcome domain	Bulgaria	Finland	Netherlands	Portugal	Cross-country interpretation
Employment education or training	Positive outcomes were reported, but follow-up covered a minority of completers	Register data showed substantial positive labour-market transitions for employment	Substantial qualification and progression outcomes among participants with follow-up	T2 information was available for too few cases for robust conclusions	Positive transitions occurred in several Living Labs; supporting data were strongest in Finland and the Netherlands
General self-efficacy	No statistically significant change	No statistically significant change	Change not analysed reliably	No statistically significant change	No consistent statistically significant change
Job-search self-efficacy	Favourable but non-significant change at the 5% threshold (d = 0.48; p = .084)	Statistically significant favourable change (d = 0.53; p < .001)	Change not analysed reliably	Small, non-significant change	Most consistent favourable questionnaire outcome
Generic skills	No statistically significant change	No statistical-ly significant change	Change not analysed reliably	Small, non-significant change	No consistent statistically significant change
Work ability	Longitudinal change not reported as a main jobseeker finding	No statistically significant change	Change not analysed reliably	Statistically significant favourable change T0-T1 (too small follow-up at T2)	Statistically significant favourable change was reported only in Portugal
Living Lab-specific outcomes	Statistically significant favourable changes in digital and personal skills for jobseekers and employees combined	Job-search self-efficacy was closely aligned with the TAITE intervention	Obtained qualifications and certificates were objective outcomes	No separate comparable result	Changes were clearer for outcomes closely aligned with the interventions

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5.4 Results for employees

Employee-level questionnaire findings were generally limited or uncertain (table 6). This pattern was particularly apparent in the Netherlands and Finland, where the interventions were delivered to supervisors and employee changes were expected to occur indirectly through supervisory practices and organisational support. Supervisor outcomes are therefore included in this section to show whether changes first occurred among the direct intervention recipients.

In Bulgaria, there was no statistically significant change in self-efficacy, job-progression self-efficacy or most secondary outcomes. The longer-term T0-T2 comparisons showed favourable but non-significant changes at the conventional 5% threshold in career planning and perceived work ability. Follow-up information suggested that some employees moved to new roles or functions, but information was missing for almost half of intervention completers and only some respondents attributed their mobility to the intervention.

In Finland, there was no statistically significant difference in change between intervention and control employees (i.e, employees of participating and non-participating supervisors) for self-efficacy, skills, career planning, organisational mobility, job satisfaction, work ability or the Living Lab-specific employee outcomes. The clearest findings occurred among the supervisors who received the intervention directly: their self-efficacy in supporting skills and career development of their employees and their ability to solve possible challenges (i.e., preparation for setbacks) increased statistically significantly.

In the Netherlands, there was no statistically significant difference in change between the intervention and waiting-list groups for the employee outcomes (i.e, employees of participating and non-participating supervisors). Perceived career possibilities changed somewhat more favourably in the intervention group, but the difference was non-significant. Career self-efficacy changed less favourably in the intervention group, but this difference was also non-significant. At supervisor level, several outcomes changed in a favourable direction, including perceived organisational mobility opportunities, career planning and clarity, and the number of formal development conversations, but none of these differences in change were statistically significant.

In Portugal, none of the employee outcomes showed a statistically significant change. Matched samples generally ranged from 11 to 19 participants. T2 mobility information was available for only three employees and cannot support a general conclusion.

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Table 6 Main findings for employees

Outcome domain	Bulgaria	Finland	Netherlands	Portugal	Cross-country interpretation
Current-job self-efficacy	No statistically significant change	No statistically significant difference in change	No statistically significant difference in change	No statistically significant change	No consistent statistically significant change
Career or job-progression self-efficacy	No statistically significant change	No statistically significant difference in change	Less favourable change in the intervention group, but the difference in change was non-significant	No statistically significant change	No consistent statistically significant favourable change
Career planning	Favourable but non-significant T0-T2 change at the 5% threshold	No statistically significant difference in change	No statistically significant difference in change	No statistically significant change	Only Bulgaria showed a favourable, but non-significant, indication
Organisational mobility	Some mobility was reported, but follow-up was incomplete	No statistically significant difference in reported mobility	No statistically significant difference in change; no objective mobility data	Only three follow-up cases were available	Insufficient evidence of consistent statistically significant change
Perceived work ability	Favourable but non-significant T0-T2 change at the 5% threshold	No statistically significant difference in change	Not reported as a principal employee outcome	Significant increase T0-T1; No statistically significant change T0-T2	Favourable directions occurred in some Living Labs, but no consistent statistically significant change
Intervention-specific or proximal outcomes	Statistically significant favourable digital-skills changes for jobseekers and employees combined	Statistically significant favourable changes in supervisors' preparedness	No employee-specific results	No robust employee-specific result	Changes were clearer in proximal outcomes among direct intervention recipients than in distal employee outcomes

5.5 Results for supervisors

Among supervisors in the Netherlands, several outcomes developed in a favourable direction (table 7). Compared with the waiting-list group, supervisors who participated in the intervention showed more favourable changes in self-reported organisational mobility opportunities, career planning and clarity, and the number of formal development conversations with employees. However, these differences in change were not statistically

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significant. The evaluation responses nevertheless indicated that the training contributed to supervisors' awareness and preparedness for supporting employees' career development, although the number of respondents was small.

Table 7 Supervisor outcomes in the Netherlands and Finland

Supervisor outcome	Netherlands	Finland
Overall	Responding supervisors evaluated the training positively.	Supervisors evaluated the training as highly useful. The content matched their needs and expectations, *M* = 5.00, and the usefulness for improving supervisory work was rated *M* = 5.19 on a scale 1-6.
Reflection and new perspectives	Not measured as a directly comparable evaluation outcome.	The training encouraged reflection on supervisors' ways of working, *M* = 5.29, and provided new ideas and perspectives, *M* = 5.10 on a scale 1-6.
Intention to change supervisory practices	Not measured as a directly comparable evaluation outcome.	Supervisors expected to change some of their practices, *M* = 4.76, and reported learning something new, *M* = 4.90 on a scale 1-6.
Preparedness to support employee development	At T2, 80% felt better prepared to conduct development conversations and 80% reported being more consciously engaged in employee development.	Readiness to support workplace learning and competence development was rated *M* = 3.81 on a 1–5 scale.
Awareness of role and opportunities	At T2, all respondents reported greater awareness of their role and responsibilities regarding employee development; 60% reported greater awareness of development opportunities for childcare professionals.	Readiness to understand different ways of learning at work and developing competence was rated *M* = 4.14 on a scale 1-5.
Discussing development with employees	The number of formal development conversations increased more favourably in the intervention group, *d* = 0.78, although the difference in change was non-significant, *p* = .131.	Readiness to raise competence-development issues with employees was rated *M* = 4.10 on a scale 1-5.
Self-efficacy for supporting employee development	Not reported as a directly comparable outcome.	Statistically significant favourable change from 0.64 to 0.71, *d* = 0.78, *p* < .001.
Preparation for setbacks and challenges	Not reported as a directly comparable outcome.	Preparation against setbacks increased statistically significantly from 0.52 to 0.58, *d* = 0.50, *p* = .02. Readiness to address supervisory challenges was rated *M* = 3.60.
Overall conclusion	Supervisors evaluated the training positively and reported increased preparedness, awareness and engagement. Several behavioural and organisational outcomes also developed favourably, although differences in change were not statistically significant.	Supervisors evaluated the training as highly useful and reported substantial benefits for their supervisory work. Statistically significant favourable changes were found in self-efficacy and preparation against setbacks.

Note. The Dutch training-evaluation percentages were based on seven respondents at T1 and five at T2. Because these may not have been the same respondents, differences between T1 and T2 should not be interpreted as longitudinal change. The Finnish usefulness and perceived-benefit evaluations were completed by 29 supervisors directly after the training

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Among supervisors in Finland, the clearest changes concerned their preparedness to support employee skills and career development. Supervisors' self-efficacy for supporting employee development increased statistically significantly, with a standardised change of d = 0.78. Their preparedness for dealing with setbacks also increased statistically significantly, with d = 0.50. These findings indicate that the intervention strengthened outcomes that were closely aligned with the content and objectives of the supervisor coaching.

Supervisors in the Netherlands and Finland evaluated the training positively and reported benefits that were closely aligned with the intervention objectives. In the Netherlands, responding supervisors particularly reported greater awareness of their role in employee development, increased engagement with employee development and improved preparedness for conducting development conversations. Several development practices also changed in a favourable direction, although the differences in change compared with the waiting-list group were not statistically significant. In Finland, supervisors considered the training highly useful for reflecting on and improving their supervisory work. They particularly reported increased readiness to understand different forms of workplace learning and to discuss competence development with employees. In addition, statistically significant favourable changes were found in self-efficacy for supporting employee development and preparation against setbacks.

5.6 Similarities and differences across Living Labs

The findings do not show a uniform pattern of statistically significant change across the common questionnaire outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, skills, work ability, organisational mobility, career planning). Instead, favourable findings were more often found for outcomes closely aligned with the intervention content, such as job-search self-efficacy of jobseekers in Finland, digital skills in Bulgaria, jobseeker qualifications in the Netherlands, and supervisors' preparedness in Finland.

For jobseekers, positive employment, education or qualification transitions were reported in all four Living Labs, but the evidence varied from register-based data in Finland to very small follow-up samples at T2 in Portugal. The outcomes are therefore best interpreted as promising indications whose robustness differs by country.

For employees, broad individual-level changes were uncommon. The indirect design in the Netherlands and Finland provides a plausible explanation for the limited short-term employee changes: the intervention first targeted supervisors' knowledge, confidence and practices. Changes in employee confidence, career behaviour or mobility may require additional time and supportive organisational conditions, although the current quantitative results cannot establish whether such later changes will occur.

The variation between countries also reflects major differences in participant composition. The Bulgarian groups were older and highly educated, the Portuguese jobseeker group was younger and more diverse, the Finnish jobseekers were mostly long-term unemployed with secondary education, and the Netherlands intervention addressed migrant women entering childcare. These differences limit direct comparison of baseline scores and absolute changes.

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Overall, the quantitative evidence supports cautious conclusions. The strongest findings concern specific, proximal outcomes and concrete progression indicators. Evidence for consistent changes in general self-efficacy, generic skills, employee career outcomes and organisational mobility remains limited.

6. Realist evaluation results of the Living Labs

In this paragraph we present a comparative overview of the qualitative findings of the Living Labs in Bulgaria, Finland, the Netherlands and Portugal. The more elaborate description of these qualitative findings, including the CMO's derived from the data at coalition-level and the CMO's at the individual-level, is presented in Appendix 1 (Bulgaria), Appendix 2 (Finland), Appendix 3 (the Netherlands) and Appendix 4 (Portugal).

Since so many CMO's were identified, both on the coalition-level as well as on the individual-level, and the fact that we want to show the relevant information both on the relevant CMO's on a specific topic, as well as on their hindering and facilitating factors, we start each paragraph with a visualized summary of the findings on the topic presented in that paragraph. This summary will show the main messages on relevant context, mechanisms and outcomes. These visualized summaries are produced with artificial intelligence (using Copilot) on all the CMO's on the specific topics, presented in the D2.1 country reports in Appendices 1 to 4.
Following the visualised summaries, a selection of relevant CMO's is presented including the relevant hindering andfacilitating context factors, with each CMO title providing a summary of its content..
However, first we will present the response overview of each Living Lab and an overview (6.2) of the national and regional context for an inclusive labour market (6.2.1).

6.1 Response overview for each Living Lab

In the sections that follow the realist logic is applied to each of the four Living Labs. For every Lab, we first outline the data sources and the broader contextual conditions that shape both coalition functioning and participant engagement. We then examine how the coalition-level and individual-level mechanisms identified in the initial programme theory manifested in practice, and how these interacted with contextual factors to produce specific outcomes. By structuring each Living Lab analysis along the layered CMO framework, we ensure comparability across sites and provide a coherent basis for refining the overall programme theory and informing upscaling strategies in later phases of Synclusive.
On the next page an overview of the qualitative data collected per Living Lab is shown (table 8).

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Table 8 Overview of qualitative data collected

	Individual level: jobseeker[b]		Individual level: Employees		Coalition level	
	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing
Bulgaria						
Interviews	0	7 participants 2 control group	0	10 participants 3 control group	3 members 3 trainers	2 members
Focus group	0	0	0	0	0	1 (8 participants)
Finland						
Interviews	0	19 [a]	5	7	10	8
Focus group	0	0	0	0	0	1 (10 participants)
The Netherlands						
Interviews	6	0	12 (incl. supervisors of employees)	7 supervisors; 6 employees	17	15
Focus group	0	0	1 (6 employees)	0	0	0
Portugal						
Interviews	0	24	0	21	9 (incl. trainers)	14 (incl. trainers)
Focus group	0	0	0	0	0	1 (10 participants)

Note in Finland. [a] Includes interviews of Taite and IPS job coaches (4 interviews) and IPS employers (2 interviews) besides jobseekers; [b] Since the Taite and IPS coaching interventions were evidence-based, theory development was not required.

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6.2 Realist evaluation results on the coalition level

6.2.1 Coalition level and the national and regional context information of the Living Labs

In Realist Evaluation, context is essential for understanding why interventions work, for whom and under which circumstances. National and regional conditions may shape coalition formation, maintenance and institutionalisation, as well as the implementation and outcomes of interventions at organisational and individual levels (Figure 4, Section 3.4).

Appendices 1–4 describe these conditions in detail for each Living Lab. This section provides a comparative overview of the main contextual factors needed to interpret the coalition-level and individual-level findings (Table 9).

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Table 9 Comparative overview of national and regional context factors of the Living Labs

	Bulgaria – Sofia	Finland – Kokkola	Netherlands – Amersfoort	Portugal – Lisbon, Lagoa, Évora
Governance structure	Highly centralised; All employment related programmes and funding are decided at national level;	Recently (2025) decentralised; Decision making authority is delegated to the municipal level; enabling better consideration of local conditions.	Decentralised; Public employment organisations, education providers and employers hold their own mandate/decision-making authority and budget. .	Centralised; Strategic decisons are established at national level and implemented regionally through organisations like IEPF. Regional autonomy is growing.
Existing policies	Employer incentives for employers to hire different groups of unemployed; Upskilling and reskilling opportunities. Policies for women aged 50+ are oriented to early retirement; State-approved certifications for training for the target groups;	National legislation and funding mechanisms continue to guide operations; National policy changes affected key employment instruments: • Reduced resources and financial support • More obligations for jobseekers • Adult education allowance has been abolished	Benefit system for unemployed is national. Labour market region with social security administration have to help jobseekers To find a job. The regional employment service center has to support employers including jobseekers on benefit; Two national policy instruments are relevant to the Living Lab: • A subsidy scheme for workforce development • A set of sectoral development pathways to support skill progression	National vocational training policies in partnership with educational institutions and employment services promote employability of different vulnerable groups; Existing mechanisms include: • Wage subsidies • Training grants • IEFP programmes for youth & long-term unemployed Employers benefit from: • Internships • Hiring incentives • Co-financed training
Institutional quality and effective-ness	High centralisation is considered a structural constraint for the Bulgarian Living Lab: • National employment agency signed document of moral support but no active follow-through	Region has longstanding, network-based collaboration, built on close interpersonal relationships; This creates trust and enables flexible collaboration;	Government & municipal institutions act slow; The two relevant subsidy schemes were still being revised, with continuous amendments during the course of Synclusive;	Accessibility of the policies and services for employers is hampered by bureaucracy; The centralized governance often leads to delay in responses and leads to difficult alignment with employer needs;

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	Bulgaria – Sofia	Finland – Kokkola	Netherlands – Amersfoort	Portugal – Lisbon, Lagoa, Évora
	• Budgets are assigned at national level • Certifications are linked to national educational programmes			Poor coordination across sectors and service fragmentation limit system's responsiveness and inclusive effectiveness of the training;
Labour market structure	Sofia labour market is heterogenous: larger and smaller companies;	Region is dominated by SME's (83%); Limited HR-capacity	Many SME's, Childcare: sector is small and tight; Acute labour shortage	Region of Lisbon: Urban labour market, focus on higher education, research integration & tech driven Évora region: Rural and semi-urban labour market; dominated by SME's. Focus is on bridging the urban-rural digital divide; Lagoa region: A service and tourism oriented regional economy, dominated by SME's;
Economic situation	Unemployment remained (relatively) low (2,5%) for over a decade; In Sofia the number of job openings is greater than the number of jobseekers. Older, 50+ people have long been neglected for the labour market, particularly women; Trend to 'import' workers from third countries in Asia;	Finland recently reached its highest unemployment since a long time; Economic climate is weak; Economic downturn imposes financial & economic pressure on municipality & the region	Netherlands has one of the highest rates of labour market participation inm the EU. Region of Amerfoort performs above national average; However, sector-level economics (e.g. childcare; technology) are less favourable;	Lisbon: Dynamic employment environment & high number job vacancies; Ëvora: Stable economy, but uneven. Growth in tourism and agri-food, yet innovation and automation lag behind; Educational curricula are misaligned with the labour market development; Lagoa: Dominated by SME's and family businesses with much seasonal labour (tourism). There is limited HR-infrastructure. This results in economic volatility;

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	Bulgaria – Sofia	Finland – Kokkola	Netherlands – Amersfoort	Portugal – Lisbon, Lagoa, Évora
Education and training system	Employment Agency offers many state-funded training programs. These are often poorly communicated, programmes are difficult to navigate for older people, and insufficiently aligned with employer needs; There is a shortage of skilled professionals and educational training is not aligned with the professional needs in the market (e.g. lack of technical skills)	The education and training system is affected by reduced national funding; Changes in labour market require constant skill updating; Regional training institutions aim to respond to SME needs and offer targeted courses;	Netherlands vocational system offers routes at several qualification levels, including work- and school-based learning; A national body accrediting employers as training locations; Provision and certification appear uneven across occupational fields;	Formal education is well developed in Portugal. Vocational and adult learning remain fragmented and disconnected from evolving labour market demands; It lacks flexibility for vulnerable populations.
Cultural attitudes towards vulnerable groups	Employers, education and retail do not consider jobseekers 50+; A related cultural attitude was described regarding the Roma minority and other non-working domestic populations;	Attitudes towards vulnerable groups vary. Professionals within the service system generally hold positive views; Employers' attitudes are more mixed. Employers often have concerns towards longer unemployed and migrants with limited language skills;	Professionals with the employment and education system are generally positive towards vulnerable groups; Employer attitudes are more mixed, particularly regarding people with a limited language proficiency; Chilcare organisations have an open culture;.	Social attitudes towards vulnerable people are improving, the stigma remains; Particularly towards the long-term unemployed, vulnerable youth (without previous work experience) and individuals with mental health challenges;

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Governance

Governance differs substantially across the four Living Labs. Where employment governance was more centralised, the national reports describe limited scope for local policy influence (Bulgaria). Where it was more decentralised, they describe more room for local action, but also the need to settle ownership and commissioning locally (Netherlands) and reform-related uncertainty that diverted resources from coalition building (Finland).

Bulgaria has a highly centralised employment system: programmes and funding are largely determined nationally, while local offices mainly deliver centrally designed services. This restricts the scope for local adaptation and policy influence, particularly where national programmes do not align with employer needs.

Portugal also combines national strategic direction with regional implementation, particularly through IEFP and its regional branches. This provides a national support infrastructure but can delay local responses and complicate alignment with regional employer needs. Regional autonomy and local collaboration are developing, although cross-sector coordination and rural service fragmentation remain important constraints. The governance arrangements also differ between Lisbon, Évora and Lagoa (see Appendix 4).

Dutch labour-market governance is decentralised. Municipalities, public employment services, education providers and employers retain separate mandates and budgets, while the labour-market regions coordinate rather than govern. Amersfoort was described as comparatively advanced, having developed a regional employment centre relatively early. However, national and regional reforms during the Living Lab created uncertainty about structures, responsibilities and available instruments.

In Finland, responsibility for employment services shifted from the state to municipality-led employment regions in 2025. Kokkola became part of the Central Ostrobothnia employment region with seven smaller municipalities. The reform increased regional autonomy, opportunities to adapt services to regional needs and develop local partnerships, but also created organisational uncertainty and coincided with an increase in unemployment.

Existing policies

Bulgaria provides state-funded training, recognised certification and subsidised-employment incentives for employers hiring specified groups of unemployed people. However, younger unemployed people receive more policy attention than older jobseekers. Policies concerning older workers, particularly women aged 50 and over, were described as more oriented towards early retirement than towards continued labour-market participation and adaptation.

In Finland, national legislation and funding continue to shape regional employment services. Recent policy changes tightened wage-subsidy criteria, restricted rehabilitative work activities, abolished the adult education allowance and increased obligations for jobseekers. At the same time, municipalities have stronger financial incentives to reduce unemployment because they bear part of its cost.

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The Netherlands has several national instruments supporting jobseekers, employers and workplace learning, including benefit-related activation, trial placements, wage-cost support, risk-reduction instruments, job coaching and subsidies for learning at work. During Synclusive, relevant workforce-development subsidies and sectoral development pathways were still being revised, creating uncertainty about their timing, scope and conditions.

In Portugal, national vocational-training and employment policies support jobseekers and employees through IEFP programmes, training grants, wage subsidies, internships, hiring incentives and co-financed training. These instruments provide relevant support, although employer access can be constrained by bureaucracy and regional variation in implementation.

Institutional quality and effectiveness

In Bulgaria, formal institutional involvement did not always translate into operational support. The Employment Agency endorsed the coalition but contributed little to participant referral, which respondents related to limited capacity, the absence of contractual obligations and restricted room beyond existing programmes. More generally, weak communication, limited outreach and poor alignment with employer needs constrained institutional effectiveness. Public institutions were therefore not necessarily unwilling partners, but their practical contribution was limited by political, budgetary and organisational conditions.

The Kokkola Living Lab in Finland is characterised by long-standing collaboration based on close interpersonal and bilateral relationships. This familiarity supports trust, flexible cooperation and adaptation, and remained largely intact during recent reforms. However, relationship-based collaboration requires active maintenance. Strong bilateral networks can also create an overly positive perception of cooperation and reduce attention to the development of more systematic multilateral arrangements.

In the Netherlands, respondents described public institutions as relatively slow to act and fragmented across organisational units and mandates. Municipal and public-employment organisations were also undergoing restructuring during Synclusive. Continuing revisions to relevant national instruments created further uncertainty about funding, timing and implementation conditions.

In Portugal, the support available through public institutions was constrained by bureaucracy, uneven regional coordination and service fragmentation, particularly in rural areas. These conditions could delay local responses and make it more difficult to adapt employment and training activities to employer and participant needs.

Labour market structure

In Sofia (Bulgaria) the labour market is heterogeneous. Large and international companies were described as relatively self-sufficient, while smaller companies were more likely to need support but lacked the capacity for sustained participation in coalition activities. As one respondent summarised: “Those who have capacity don’t have the need of us, and those who have the need of us don’t have capacity to participate.”

Kokkola’s (Finland) employer landscape is dominated by micro-enterprises: 83% of companies have fewer than six employees. These employers often have no dedicated HR

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capacity and their focus is on day-to-day business operations. Even when willing to employ jobseekers in vulnerable positions, they may have insufficient capacity for recruitment, onboarding, workplace support or participation in broader coalition activities.

No sector-wide figure was available for the distribution of SMEs and large employers in the Amersfoort (Netherlands) region. Within childcare, the sector was described as small and closely connected but lacking a single employer organisation able to represent it. Coalition development therefore required engagement with individual childcare providers, which differed considerably in size and organisational capacity.

The Portuguese regional economies, particularly Évora and Lagoa, are dominated by SMEs. Their limited HR and organisational capacity can restrict inclusive recruitment, employee development and long-term participation. Practical and tailored support is therefore particularly relevant for employer engagement.

Economic situation

Bulgaria combines low unemployment and substantial labour shortages with uneven sectoral demand. In Sofia, employers reported more vacancies than available jobseekers, particularly in technical occupations. At the same time, some sectors faced declining demand, automation and business closures, particularly outside Sofia. Employers also increasingly recruited workers from third countries through specialised agencies, which could reduce incentives to invest in the inclusion of vulnerable groups already living in Bulgaria.

Kokkola (Finland) faced increasing unemployment and declining job opportunities during the project, strengthening employers' ability to select from a larger pool of candidates. This disadvantaged jobseekers facing additional barriers and reduced employers' capacity to invest in training and inclusive recruitment. Municipal financial pressure simultaneously increased the need for cooperation and more efficient use of regional resources.

The Netherlands has high labour-market participation, with Amersfoort performing above the national average. Nevertheless, the relevant sectors faced important capacity constraints. Childcare providers reported structurally thin margins and limited resources for additional workplace supervision. In technology, high wage and secondment costs contributed to cautious recruitment.

Economic conditions differed across the Portuguese settings. Lisbon had a relatively dynamic and diversified labour market. Évora combined growth in tourism and agri-food with youth unemployment, rural out-migration, limited innovation and mismatches between education and emerging skills needs. Lagoa depended strongly on tourism, hospitality, SMEs and family businesses, making employment more seasonal and volatile and limiting HR capacity for stable inclusion pathways.

Education and training system

Bulgaria has an extensive system of state-funded and occupation-specific training, but programmes were described as difficult for some older adults to navigate, insufficiently communicated and not always aligned with employer needs. The focus on recognised occupational qualifications leaves less room for personal development and soft skills.

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Conversely, the Living Lab in Sofia offer addressed digital and soft skills but did not provide the technical qualifications required for many vacancies. The decline of technical secondary education has contributed to shortages in technical occupations.

In Finland, reduced national funding has led to cuts in training provision and qualifications, while labour-market change requires continuous skill development. Kokkola nevertheless benefits from several regional education providers, established partnerships and a regional skills-forecasting network. Providers offer targeted courses and continuing education, including support intended to improve job matching and onboarding. Municipal ownership of regional training institutions may further support coordination, although the abolition of the adult education allowance has reduced individuals' financial access to training.

The Dutch vocational system offers school-based and work-based routes at different qualification levels, with nationally regulated qualifications and employer accreditation. However, modular routes, partial certificates and flexible entry options are unevenly available across occupations. This affects which pathways can be developed for people who do not yet meet the requirements of a full vocational programme.

Portugal has a well-developed formal education system, but vocational and adult-learning provision was described as fragmented, insufficiently aligned with changing regional labour-market needs and not always flexible enough for vulnerable participants.

Cultural attitudes towards vulnerable groups

In Bulgaria, respondents described persistent age discrimination as a major labour-market barrier. Employers were often reluctant to recruit people aged 50 and over, who could be perceived as less adaptable or less digitally skilled. Respondents also reported age-based automated screening in some recruitment processes. At the same time, some employers valued older workers' experience, loyalty and maturity, showing that age could be perceived as both a disadvantage and an asset. Roma and other vulnerable domestic groups could remain excluded even where employers recruited workers from third countries.

In Finland, service professionals generally expressed positive attitudes towards long-term unemployed persons, while employer attitudes were more mixed. Concerns included productivity, absence (e.g., sickness leaves) and limited language proficiency. High unemployment could reinforce selectivity. Conversely, regional social responsibility, inclusive employers and targeted onboarding or workplace support could facilitate recruitment.

In the Netherlands, employment and education professionals generally supported inclusion, whereas employer attitudes were more varied. Groups with less familiar barriers, including limited Dutch proficiency, were only gradually becoming visible to employers. Workplace acceptance also depended on the amount of unsupported supervision expected from existing staff. Childcare organisations were nevertheless described as relatively open to exchanging practices across organisations.

In Portugal, the country report identifies continuing stigma towards long-term unemployed people, young people without work experience and people with mental-health challenges. Awareness raising, employer engagement and credible examples were

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considered potential ways of challenging these perceptions, but the available evidence does not establish a general change in employer attitudes.

Other relevant context factors

In Finland, support structures were directed mainly towards unemployed jobseekers, while employed people in vulnerable positions generally had to initiate their own competence development. The decline of entry-level jobs further restricted pathways for people with limited qualifications. Strict data-protection requirements also complicated information exchange between service providers or coalition partners. Although these requirements supported trust and legitimacy, they could slow coordination and, in some cases, obstruct potential employment pathways.

In the Netherlands, policy and implementation focused primarily on preparing and supporting candidates, with less structural attention to the workplaces and supervisors receiving them. Respondents identified this as a gap between initial placement and sustainable retention. In addition, national labour-market reform was still developing during the project, with full statutory implementation not expected before 2027. Regional initiatives therefore operated within a governance environment whose structures and responsibilities were still being settled.

Implications of contextual differences across the Living Labs

Across the Living Labs, contextual factors did not operate independently. Governance structures shaped the scope for regional adaptation, while labour-market conditions, economic pressures and employer structures influenced both the willingness and capacity of organisations to participate. Positive attitudes towards inclusion did not necessarily imply sufficient capacity: limited HR resources, administrative burden, supervision costs, uncertain funding and a lack of suitable positions could constrain employer engagement even where employers supported the overall objectives.

Education, training and policy systems also influenced whether improvements in skills, confidence or preparedness could be converted into recognised qualifications, suitable vacancies, employment, retention or mobility. These contextual differences affected who could be reached, which interventions could be implemented as intended and which outcomes were feasible within the project period. The same intervention resource could therefore activate different mechanisms and produce different outcomes across the Living Labs.

6.2.2 Coalition-level mechanisms regarding coalition formation phase

In this section, we discuss the overarching coalition-level mechanisms regarding coalition building. Appendices 1 to 4 report the CMO configurations for each Living Lab

We present 6 overarching CMO's on coalition formation. In order to summarise all the information on coalition building, the information on coalition building presented in the national reports in Appendices 1 to 4 was used as input for Figure 5 below. The figure was then refined and discussed in the research team, and optically refined using generative AI.This resulted in the visualized summary picture in Figure 5, which can be captured by the statement ‘from trusted relationships to coordinated action’. We describe the coalition building by a stepwise

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process, with two steps which may potentially lead to a stalling of the coalition building process. Figure 5 is based on our own interpretation of the qualitative coalition data.

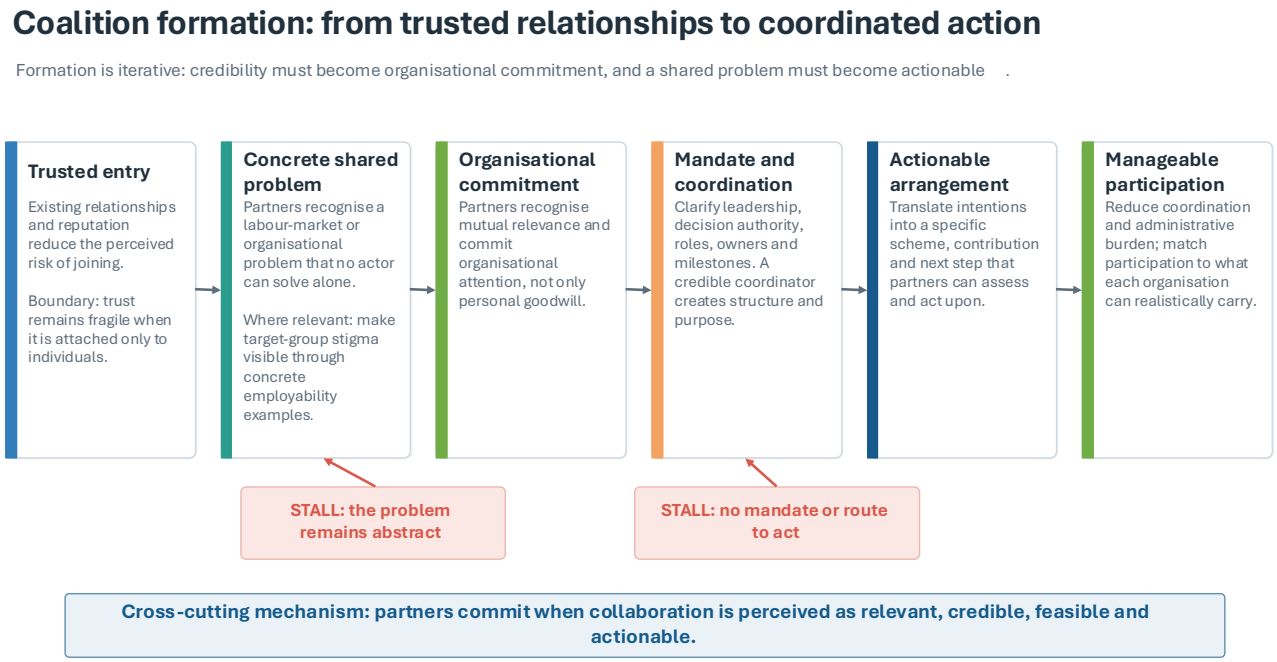

Figure 5 Summary of the coalition formation CMO configurations

In all Living Labs, the coalition building phase started with existing relationships, public and private organisations which often already knew one another. The cross-cutting mechanism is that coalition partners should share a problem or acknowledge or recognize the need for a shared goal. A potential problem is that the shared problem or goal will remain abstract when no follow-up action is taken. The initial phase of the coalition is often with persons who know and trust each other. However, at this stage, the coalition still is extremely fragile. Coalitions are more likely to endure when they rest on organizations that recognize the problem and see it as relevant to them, which leads to organizational commitment, rather than on individuals who are personally willing. The people at the coalition table should have a mandate to act, otherwise nothing will be decided and no actions agreed upon. If the process is stalled, there is a risk that organisations experience the coalition as a loss of time since nothing is really done. It is important that eventually an actionable arrangement is decided upon and progress can be made visible. For organisations to participate, it is generally experienced as important that coordination costs of the coalition can be shared or that this burden be (partly) taken away.

Below important CMO's are presented to illustrate the experiences of the Living Labs in this coalition building process. Each title of a CMO can be considered a short summary of that CMO configuration.

1. Recruiting partners through relationships that already exist

IF a new coalition has no track record and can offer no guarantees, while regional stakeholders already know one another or know each other by reputation,

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THEN a convening organisation can approach partners informally through relationships that already exist, rather than through a formal invitation,

LEADING TO partners transfer their confidence in the person to the initiative, so that trust in an individual substitutes for trust in an institution that does not yet exist,

AS A RESULT commitment is given more quickly and without formal arrangements, and the coalition begins working before its governance is settled.

Hindering context factors

- **Collaboration is carried by individuals rather than by organisations.** Respondents describe collaboration in this region as running on personal relationships rather than on formal agreements between organisations. That makes things quick to start, but it also means the trust belongs to individuals and does not transfer when one of them moves on.
- **Parties you need who are each other's competitors.** Where two organisations of the same kind are both needed, an informal approach through relationships does not resolve which of them to work with. Convening both is feasible in principle, but it requires raising the matter at board level, which in turn requires first securing board-level backing inside the initiating organisation. The reported cost of this route was time.
- **Employers already fielding more initiatives than they can tell apart.** A relational approach does not help where the obstacle is volume rather than unfamiliarity. A respondent working nationally described employers declining at the outset because it feels like the twenty-fifth initiative, adding that there are so many projects, pilots and ideas that people stop seeing the wood for the trees.

Facilitating context factors

- **A region small enough that reputation arrives before contact does.** Partners are within one or two steps of each other, so an approach tends to arrive with a reputation already attached. That lets a partner form a judgement about whether to engage before there is any formal proposition to assess.
- **Partners who already hold working relationships with employers.** Some partners have had standing relationships with employers before the coalition existed. This lets the coalition draw on those relationships from the outset, rather than spending its first year establishing contact and credibility with each employer itself.

Next to addressing the start of the coalition formation and to include a vulnerable target group to build a coalition on, is to address a common regional problem for the employer or sector, e.g. a personnel or staffing shortage:

2. Framing the staffing shortage as a problem shared across the sector

IF there is a labour shortage severe enough that employers cannot fill their vacancies through their own recruitment,

THEN a municipality or sector body can approach regional stakeholders and present the shortage as a problem shared across the sector rather than as each organisation's own recruitment difficulty,

LEADING TO stakeholders conclude that the problem is larger than any of them can solve alone and that acting together is worth the uncertainty,

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AS A RESULT stakeholders are committed to further exploring the working in a regional coalition.

Hindering context factors

- **A shortage severe enough to remove the time needed to act on it.** A labour shortage cuts both ways here. It gives employers a reason to act, but it also means the person who would attend coalition meetings tends to be fully occupied covering shifts. The worse the shortage, the stronger the reason to join and the less time there is to do so.
- **An instrument that has no concrete form yet.** Where the scheme a coalition is built around has not yet been published, willingness cannot be converted into a proposition a partner can weigh, and so remains at the level of intention.
- **Sub-sectors that differ too much for one sector-wide approach to fit.** Respondents working across regions suggest whole sectors are rarely in the same position. “Childcare” or “technology” each contain very different kinds of organisation: some parts are well organised through their own trade bodies and move quickly, others consist mostly of small firms with no such support. An invitation addressed to a sector as a whole may therefore speak to none of these situations precisely enough for any of them to recognise their own problem in it.

Facilitating context factors

- **A shortage that is visible in concrete terms.** A provider facing the prospect of closing locations is something other employers can picture happening to them, in a way regional vacancy figures do not. Where employers recognise their own likely future in another organisation’s situation, they are more willing to treat it as a shared problem than as that organisation’s bad luck.
- **Providers that already describe themselves in terms of a social purpose.** One employer described her organisation as an explicitly socially engaged provider that does not want to solve problems alone. For organisations of that kind, joining an initiative about employing people from vulnerable groups confirms an identity they already hold rather than asking them to adopt a new one, which may be why agreeing to take part costs them relatively little internally.
- **Access to data on the regional labour market.** Access to labour market data provided insight into the regional labour market and helped the coalition identify where labour shortages existed and which sectors and employers had vacancies the most. A respondent working nationally highlighted the value of having this information available when deciding which employers to approach. Having such data available helped frame the problem as shared in more concrete terms.

A consequence of the informal start of the coalition may be that no formal roles and tasks are assigned to a person or an organization. This will lead to a stall in the coalition formation, or may even lead to people or organisations dropping out of the coalition.

3. Stalling where commissioning and mandate are left unassigned

IF a coalition has formed informally through existing relationships, so that no commissioning body has been designated, no project plan exists, and partners are represented by staff with operational responsibilities rather than authority to commit,

THEN meetings continue to take place, but there is no route from something agreed in a meeting to action taken by the organisations behind the table,

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LEADING TO participants reason that they are structurally under-authorised, able to consult but not to decide, and increasingly doubting whether further investment of their time is worthwhile,

AS A RESULT progress stalls, and involvement erodes among the partners who cannot proceed.

CONVERSELY this same stalling is what makes the correction possible. Respondents describe the visible cost of the standstill as what legitimated appointing a coordinator and designating a commissioner, which is the pattern that follows.

Hindering context factors

- **Trust that was vested in individuals rather than in arrangements.** Because the coalition started through personal relationships, as described in the previous pattern, the departure of one central figure has removed what was holding the work together, and respondents describe the period immediately afterwards as stagnation.
- **A regional layer with no hierarchy, where authority stays with each member.** The Dutch labour market is marked by a flat hierarchy, so no coalition member alone can decide the course. Where partners send operational staff, those representatives cannot bind their own organisation, and on respondents' accounts agreement reached in the room does not then become action.
- **A central instrument that had no concrete form yet.** During this same period the national scheme the coalition was built around had not been published, so respondents have had nothing definite to put in front of partners. This has compounded the stalling: there was neither the authority to decide nor anything specific to decide about.
- **No occasion set aside for discussing the collaboration itself.** A coalition needs moments for talking about how the work is going, separately from the substance of the work. Where no such occasion exists, it is unclear who may raise a difficulty and when, so friction is left unspoken and accumulates. Respondents described unspoken tension as harder to resolve later than it would have been at the time.

Facilitating context factor

- **A partner with experience of running coalitions, who can lead the conversation about the collaboration itself.** What was missing was not goodwill but someone used to this kind of work. One respondent said plainly that these projects had not been run with an experienced project manager, and that a number of things such a person would have arranged at the front end simply had not been. Because someone with that background stepped in as quartermaster, the coalition could be taken apart and put back together deliberately. She describes arriving at a point where nothing concrete was happening and everyone felt responsible while nobody felt responsible for creating movement. What this kind of partner brings is less the substantive work than the ability to hold a conversation about how the collaboration is running, which is what nobody had been positioned to do.

4. Assigning a coordinator, roles and mandates is needed for progressing the formation of a coalition that works

IF the organisations in a coalition each retain their own decision-making authority and are represented by staff without a mandate to commit,

THEN the coalition can or should appoint a coordinator acting as a facilitating leader, and record roles, tasks and responsibilities in writing,

LEADING TO participants understand what they are authorised to decide, and consequently dare to raise problems and take initiative without first seeking reassurance,

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AS A RESULT deliberation converts into decisions and the coalition will be/is able to act on behalf of its members.

CONVERSELY where commissioning and mandate remain unassigned, participants can consult but not commit, so meetings do not produce action, progress stalls, and involvement erodes among partners who cannot proceed.

Hindering context factors

- **Work beginning before any project plan exists.** This coalition in the Netherlands' Living Lab has begun without a project plan. Questions an experienced project manager would settle at the very start, such as who delivers what by when, were left open, and were only answered after a standstill made continuing without answers impossible.
- **Employers with limited tolerance for governance architecture.** A respondent working nationally suggested employers are not often waiting for governance structures. That sets a ceiling on how much structure a coalition can build before partners disengage, which suggests what matters is that decision rights are clear rather than that the arrangement is elaborate.

Facilitating context factors

- **A coordinator appointed from outside the existing relationships.** Such a coordinator has no stake in how tasks were divided previously. Steering on milestones, planning and division of roles has introduced a discipline the informal arrangement had not produced.
- **A coordinator not held to short-term delivery targets.** The coordinating role was briefed to build recognition and lay groundwork rather than to be judged on placement numbers. Since that early work produces no quick results, a coordinator judged on numbers might haveskipped it in favour of quick wins.
- **A facilitative rather than directive leadership style.** The role has worked best where the coordinator proposed a way forward for the group to accept or amend, rather than deciding alone and issuing instructions. Partners have needed to experience the mandate as organising their own commitment, not as being managed from above.

5. Turning intentions into something partners can examine

IF partners are asked to invest time in an initiative whose product, timing and conditions are not yet concrete, and whose meetings produce no decisions,

THEN the coalition converts intention into something that can be examined: a published instrument, decisions with named owners, next steps with dates, and visible movement between meetings,

LEADING TO partners appearing able to weigh what participation costs against what they can see it producing, and to conclude that the coalition does what it says,

AS A RESULT stated willingness converts into commitment.

CONVERSELY where meetings recur without decisions, deadlines or a tangible product, partners conclude that the return does not justify the time, and engagement erodes towards what one participant called another talking group that people decline to join.

Hindering context factors

- **Dependence on a national ministry for the instrument itself.** The pathway's content, funding and mandate were set by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment rather than by the coalition. Two respondents independently described this as disruptive: one for how unevenly funding and formal assignment was distributed across regions, the other for how slowly and unpredictably information reached the coalition.

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- **Instruments whose conditions are still being revised.** Where a national scheme is still being amended, no one in the coalition can state what participation will yield or when funding becomes available and on what terms.

Facilitating context factors

- **A published scheme partners can finally assess.** Once the national training routes were published, with the available job profiles and courses set out, partners have had something specific to assess against their own situation. On the accounts given, this is what turns general willingness into a decision an organisation can actually take.
- **Employers needing to know an arrangement will still exist next year.** Employers build their own staffing plans and business cases around what they commit to. A respondent working nationally put it plainly: where a coalition looks erratic, an employer asks what they are supposed to get out of it, and may discount it regardless of its content.
- **Trust already accumulated through earlier contact.** Publishing something concrete turns willingness into a firm commitment only if partners read it as the coalition delivering what it promised rather than as pressure to decide. That reading depends on clear governance and on the regular contact described under coalition maintenance below.

6. Absorbing the coordinating work rather than passing it to employers

IF taking part in a coalition carries coordinating work for employers, in the form of meetings to attend, several public bodies to deal with and paperwork to complete such as subsidy applications, and organisations differ in whether anyone's role allows them to take that work on,

THEN a partner of the coalition can take that work on itself rather than passing it across: one point of contact instead of several, subsidy applications completed on the employer's behalf rather than the requirements being explained and the work left with them, meeting formats and timing that fit operational reality, and a scale of participation matched to what each organisation can carry,

LEADING TO employers judge participation as more feasible in the currency they are actually short of, which is time and attention rather than goodwill,

AS A RESULT participation and follow-through are less likely to concentrate among the organisations that happen to have staff for this kind of work.

CONVERSELY where nobody absorbs this work, managers at larger organisations can reason that a colleague with a dedicated function can pick it up, while managers at small organisations reason that they have other things to do and let the opportunity lapse, even where they consider it worthwhile.

Hindering context factors

- **Public bodies that each keep their own line to the employer.** A coalition would only be able to offer one point of contact if the other public organisations involved were willing to route through it. Where each retains its own account manager and approaches the employer directly, as respondents describe, the coalition may be unable to deliver the single interlocutor it is offering, however much it takes on itself. That the remedy proposed by a respondent working nationally was explicitly an integrated approach suggests the obstacle may lie in coordination between public bodies rather than in any one of them.
- **Administrative requirements set nationally, which the coalition can carry but not reduce.** A coalition can complete an application on an employer's behalf, but cannot change what a scheme demands or when it opens. There may therefore be a floor below which the

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burden cannot be absorbed, and where requirements sit above what the benefit is worth, small organisations might still decline.

- **A binding constraint that may be money rather than time.** Absorbing coordination addresses the time cost of taking part, but not the cost of supervision on the floor. Margins in childcare are described as thin across the sector, and the cost of an extra supervising member of staff is not covered by what a group brings in. Where the real barrier is financial rather than administrative, this resource does not reach it, which may be part of why arrangements of this kind are sustainable during a funded pilot but less so afterwards.
- **The coalition's own coordinating capacity resting on time-limited funding.** Taking work off employers presumably requires someone paid to do it. A respondent working across regions identified whether money was freed up for someone to spend days on this as the clearest difference between regions that progress and regions that stall, which suggests this mechanism may itself be vulnerable to the funding conditions described elsewhere in this document.

Facilitating context factors

- **An organisation whose formal role is serving employers.** The region already has an organisation whose formal role is advising and supporting employers rather than regulating or funding them; its adviser described her own remit as being there for the employer. Taking coordinating work off employers would therefore be part of that organisation's job rather than an additional burden someone has to be talked into carrying.
- **Administrative expertise already sitting with that organisation.** That same organisation deals with the relevant funding schemes routinely and, knows how the paperwork works. That expertise is what makes it possible to complete applications on an employer's behalf, rather than explaining the requirements and leaving the work with them.
- **A sector mixing a few large providers with many small ones.** The local childcare sector consists of a few larger providers alongside many small ones. That variation makes it possible to ask different things of different organisations: a small employer can take one candidate where a larger one can take a group. Asking the same of both might either overwhelm the small provider or waste the larger one's capacity.

6.2.3 Coalition-level mechanisms regarding coalition maintenance phase

In this paragraph, we summarized the CMO's identified on coalition maintenance in the Appendices 1 to 4, using AI (Copilot) and refining it with input from the consortium. Unlike coalition building, maintenance does not appear to follow a stepwise process. The topics identified are relevant to maintenance as such and can be grouped under "sustaining commitment through reciprocity and learning". The overarching mechanism in this phase appears to be repeated exchange of information, which strengthens trust, ownership and confidence that commitments will be acted upon.

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Figure 6 Summary of coalition maintenance CMO's

1. Strategic alignment and mutual dependence are important for sustained collaboration

IF Aligning coalition digital training directly with regional economic strategies (e.g., Évora's agritech/aeronautics or Lagoa's smart tourism) fosters mutual dependence between local authorities, training providers, and businesses,

THEN Key institutions move from viewing the coalition as an ad-hoc project to integrating its methodologies into standard operating procedures and local innovation ecosystems,

LEADING TO Sustained collaboration pathways,

AS A RESULT an integration of technology incubators and business associations into regular data-sharing schedules and formal secondary school entrepreneurship programs.

Hindering context factor

- Regional infrastructure deficits (e.g., digital divide in rural Alentejo); lack of dedicated long-term funding past external grant lifecycles.

Facilitating context factor

- Stable resource allocation for the lead coordinating partner (Iscte); integration into regional innovation hubs (e.g., PACT in Évora).

2. Continued funding enables sustained activities, trust and participation

IF the initial benefits for employers and older workers had already been demonstrated, but the project remained too small in scale and too short in duration to establish broad stakeholder trust,

THEN funding enabling further implementation combined with the promotion of an expanding pool of success stories via social media, could strengthen engagement among employers and other stakeholders,

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LEADING TO visible evidence of positive outcomes that can enhance credibility, reinforce the value of inclusive employment practices, and build confidence in the intervention over time,

AS A RESULT greater numbers of employers and older workers could be attracted to participate, thereby maximising the intervention's impact on the local labour market.

Hindering context factors

- The project operated on a relatively small scale for a capital city, and its duration was too limited to allow the development of broad stakeholder trust.

Facilitating context factor

- Synclusive had already generated tangible benefits for employers, including greater awareness of the strengths of older workers and examples of inclusive workplace practices, as well as for older workers through improved competitiveness, self-confidence, and motivation.

3. Competing partners should regularly meet under a facilitator they experience as neutral

IF a coalition needs organisations which normally compete with one another for the same staff and have no shared setting outside that competition,

THEN they are brought together at regular intervals, hosted in turn on each other's premises, by a party they experience as being there for them rather than as an authority over them,

LEADING TO participants judge the setting safe enough to say what is not working as well as what is,

AS A RESULT a group forms that exchanges experience openly and keeps contact outside the meetings.

Hindering context factors

- **Competition for the same scarce staff.** The childcare providers in this coalition compete with each other for the same people, which made the first meetings a matter of mutual probing rather than exchange. Stronger competitive feelings among partners required additional time to work through these possible frictions.
- **Organisations sending a different representative each time.** Where the person attending changes, familiarity does not accumulate, since it builds between individual people rather than between organisations. Each new face returns the group some way towards the guarded stage it started in.

Facilitating context factors

- **The same individuals returning over several meetings.** In this coalition the employers met every three months, and one participant attributed the change in atmosphere not to how often they met but to the fact that the same faces kept returning.
- **The convening organisation's existing standing with employers.** Employers accept an organisation they see as existing to support them more readily than one they associate with inspection, funding conditions or enforcement, even where the content of the meeting would be identical.
- **A rotating venue with a tour of the host's own premises.** Seeing how another organisation actually works produces a familiarity that a meeting room does not, and to prompt comparisons a verbal description would not.

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- **A sector already used to sharing practice across organisations.** One participant described the sessions as genuinely participative, with providers sharing information honestly. That existing habit is part of what makes candid exchange possible once the setting feels safe enough.
- **A mix of larger and smaller providers in the room.** Where every organisation present faces identical circumstances there is little to learn from each other, so differences in size and working method are what make attending worthwhile.

4. Making explicit who brings what, wants what, and is responsible for what, and recording it

IF participation is non-binding and if what each partner actually expects to contribute, gain and be responsible for has never been said out loud, so that different partners may be assuming different things without anyone finding out until something goes wrong,

THEN the coalition works through, with each partner directly, what it wants from participation, what it can offer in return, and where its own responsibility starts and stops, and sets this down in a document the partners formulate together and sign,

LEADING TO partners recognise themselves specifically in the arrangement rather than only a shared goal stated in general terms, and being able to hold each other, and themselves, to what was actually agreed,

AS A RESULT commitment becomes explicit and reciprocal, something partners can be held to, rather than an assumed and open-ended goodwill.

CONVERSELY where roles and contributions stay implicit, partners project their own expectations onto the collective without anyone confirming them, responsibility for follow-through has no clear owner, and a document signed on top of that would record an intention no one has actually tested.

Hindering context factors

- **Divergent organisational interests.** Partners do not need the same goal to work together, but that divergence makes the conversation more delicate and makes explicit articulation of contributions the more necessary.
- **Written declarations meaning different things to public bodies and to employers.** Written declarations are a familiar instrument in the public sector and a less familiar one for employers, whose commitments are usually commercial and specific. The same document may therefore be read by a public body as a statement of intent and by an employer as an obligation it is not certain it can honour.

Facilitating context factors

- **A direct one-to-one relationship with each employer.** The coalition holds a separate relationship with each employer, which is what makes it possible to prepare a collective step through individual conversations beforehand.
- **Accountability already settled.** Organisations unlikely to sign up to obligations towards a group while it is still unclear who in that group decides what, or who is accountable if things go wrong. Settling mandates and commissioning, described earlier in this document, should therefore come first.
- **Earlier joint work that partners can point to.** The coalition has earlier joint work partners can refer to, which may give a new commitment a precedent so that signing up reads as continuing something already under way. Earlier joint work, particularly that was successful and beneficial to these partners built trust and commitment.

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5. Repeating examples from comparable organisations further build trust, not only inform

IF the organisations that would have to adopt a practice hesitate not because they are against it, but because it is new territory they have no experience with, and the group already trusts each other enough to take one another's experiences seriously,

THEN concrete examples of comparable organisations that have already done it are put in front of them at every meeting as an opening for discussion, and the coalition consistently asks what it can offer employers in return, not only what employers can contribute,

LEADING TO participants feel that a genuine, two-way relationship is accumulating rather than a one-sided ask, which lets the practice itself start to look feasible for organisations like theirs rather than exceptional,

AS A RESULT individual interest turns into something the whole group visibly stands behind and is willing to act on together.

Hindering context factors

- **Hesitation that comes from unfamiliarity rather than objection.** Childcare employers here are not opposed in principle to recruiting people with limited work experience or limited Dutch; most simplyhave never done it. If the obstacle is unfamiliarity, it would follow that a single presentation does not shift it, and the pattern here suggests repeated exposure over a long period does while argument does not.
- **Absence of cohesion in the group.** Without an established basis of trust, peer examples are liable to be received skeptically rather than taken as relevant.
- **A relationship that runs in one direction only.** The coordinator attributed employers' trust to two things together: what the coalition gives back to them, and what it does on the demand side on their behalf. Where a coalition only ever asks, that basis is absent and peer examples may be felt as another request.

Facilitating context factors

- **Examples recognisably similar to the employer looking at them.** An employer weighing something they have never done is asking whether it is feasible for an organisation of their size, in their sector, with their staffing. A case from a comparable childcare provider answers that question in a way an impressive example from a different sector does not.
- **Comparable providers elsewhere who have already done this.** Childcare providers elsewhere in the country have already run training routes of this kind, so real examples with named results exist to bring to each meeting. A respondent working nationally suggested an example from within the group itself would be more persuasive still.

6. Co-creating trajectory content with employers before commissioning curriculum design

IF a training trajectory for a vulnerable target group must be constructed from scratch and includes a substantial work-based placement component,

THEN the coalition works with employers, iteratively rather than through a single round of input, to crystallise what a candidate needs to learn and be able to do over the course of the trajectory to function as a colleague, and only then commissions education to translate that specification into curriculum content,

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LEADING TO employers recognise the resulting curriculum as the product of content they helped work out in detail, rather than a specification handed to education to interpret alone,

AS A RESULT employer engagement with, and reported ownership of, the trajectory increases.

CONVERSELY where employers are consulted once and briefly, or not until after curriculum design, the resulting curriculum does not be calibrated to what employers actually need, and ownership may correspondingly be lower.

Hindering context factors

- **National qualification files that bound what can be agreed.** Dutch vocational qualifications are defined in national qualification files, which specify what a course must cover and what a graduate must be able to do. These are set nationally by the body responsible for connecting vocational education to the labour market. Whatever employers and the coalition work out together still has to fit them, which suggests what the conversation can settle may be bounded before it begins.
- **Thin margins and no spare capacity to engage properly.** Childcare operates on thin margins with most providers having no staff to spare. An employer under that pressure might attend the design meeting, agree with whatever is put forward, and leave without having said what their organisation actually needs and how a program can actually fit their situation. Attendance is therefore not necessarily the same thing as co-creation.

Facilitating context factors

- **Freedom because no course exists, because the trajectory is built from nothing.** This trajectory did not yet exist and had to be built from scratch, so no vocational school has had a ready-made course to put forward. That absence is what left the content open, with employers deciding what the training should contain rather than commenting on a syllabus that already existed.
- **The national qualifications body is present and reachable in the region.** The body responsible for vocational qualifications has a regional presence and knows precisely what the national files do and do not permit. Once it is in the room it can tell employers on the spot whether what they are proposing is possible, rather than the coalition discovering months later that an idea cannot be approved.
- **Few enough employers to know each other individually.** The childcare sector in this region is small enough for the coalition partners to know each participating employer individually, which is what makes repeated detailed discussion practical. With several hundred employers rather than a dozen, this way of working would presumably be much harder to sustain.

7. Setting one framework for all jobseekers before placements begin

IF a coalition places a group of jobseekers with several organisations or locations at the same time, and each of these applies its own rules, while jobseekers' financial arrangements also differ,

THEN the partners agree in advance on one framework that applies to every jobseeker, covering what jobseekers may and may not do, how they are paid or supported, and which partner is responsible for what, and they make this framework known from the first week,

LEADING TO jobseekers finding that their situation matches that of the others in their group, and partners being able to refer to the framework when a placement deviates from it,

AS A RESULT jobseekers are less likely to read differences between placements as unequal treatment, and the group can focus on the trajectory itself.

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> **CONVERSELY** where each placement sets its own terms, jobseekers who know each other well compare their situations, and differences that may be reasonable on their own become a source of unrest.

Hindering context factors

- **Income support rules that differ with each jobseekers' situation.** National rules allow some jobseekers to keep a benefit while others have no entitlement. Within these rules, a trajectory can set one condition for participation, for example that the trajectory is for those with a benefit. Where no such condition was set, participants in the same group faced different financial conditions, which in the Dutch Living Lab led to comparison and unrest among participants.
- **Placements spread across organisations or locations that each set their own practice.** Where decisions about daily arrangements sit with each location, differences arise without anyone intending them, and jobseekers are usually the first to notice.

Facilitating context factors

- **A partner that holds the financial arrangements in one place.** The employer adviser described her organisation as carrying the financial side of the trajectory. That makes it possible to set one rule centrally rather than negotiating it with each placement.
- **A partner willing to act as the driving force with all parties present.** The employer adviser suggested that uniformity follows when one partner takes the lead in bringing everyone together, rather than each employer arranging matters separately.
- **A first trajectory whose problems partners can name concretely.** Partners could draw on what went wrong in the Living Lab when agreeing what the framework should cover.

6.2.4 Coalition-level mechanisms regarding institutionalisation phase

Institutionalisation represents the embedding of coalition-developed practices into (more) permanent governance structures and organizational routines. Figure 7 shows the AI generated visual summary of the CMO information presented in the appendices 1 to 4 regarding the institutionalization phase. Considerably less CMO's were identified on the coalition institutionalization as compared to the coalition building and maintenance phase. This probably is the case since none of the Living Labs really experienced this phase for an extended period, or may have been on the verge of experiencing it. This suggests that building and maintaining a coalition takes considerable time, the Livinghad been under development for at least two and a half years.

Two processes appear important in this phase. The first is that careful evaluation and learning should take place, resulting in potential redesign of the process thus far before 'embedding' in regional structures can take place. This evaluation and learning process may even be considered to be part of the previous phases, as long as it precedes the embedding in regional structures.

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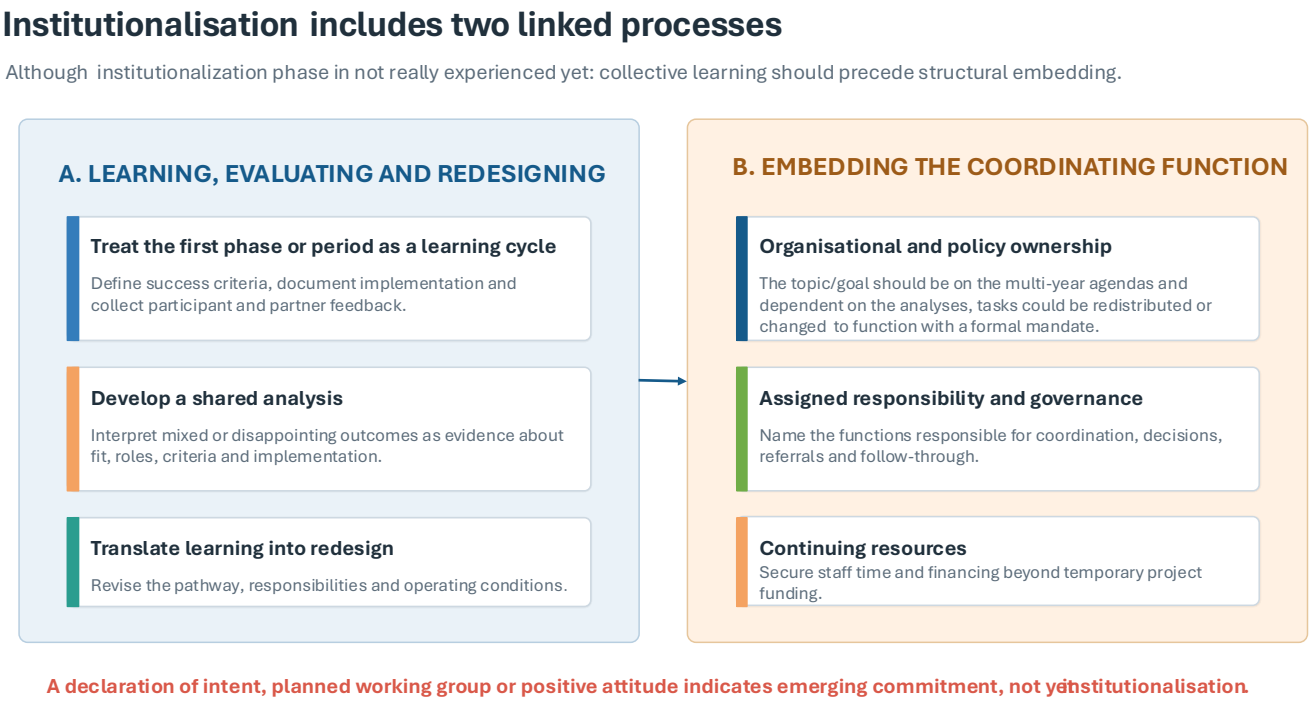

Figure 7 The processes relevant to the institutionalization phase

Two relevant CMO's illustrating the process of this phase are included below.

1. Evaluating a first attempt openly and translating the diagnosis into a revised design

IF a first trajectory has produced identifiable failures, and an actor is available who has no stake in describing it favourably,

THEN the coalition evaluates it explicitly with those who carried the consequences, including candidates and receiving locations, and translates the diagnosis into concrete design changes,

LEADING TO the coalition treats the failure as working material rather than as a verdict on the approach, and deliberately takes the steps it had previously skipped,

AS A RESULT the next iteration rests on a specific diagnosis rather than on assumption.

CONVERSELY where failure is read as a verdict on the approach rather than as information about it, the attempt is likely to be discontinued and the diagnosis lost with it.

Hindering context factors

- **A scheduled checkpoint with no agreed criteria behind it.** Setting a decision date is insufficient on its own if the group has not also agreed what a candidate needs to have reached by then. In this coalition that is what produced inconsistent decisions, with some contracts extended for people who months later still had not met the requirement.
- **Evaluation driven from one partner organisation.** One respondent disagreed with how the pilot evaluation was run, describing it as looked at from the wrong angle, namely how the employer and the public employment service had experienced it, when in her view the coalition does not exist for either of them.

Facilitating context factors

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- **An evaluator with no stake in a favourable account.** Somebody was available to review what happened who gains nothing from a positive description of it. Where every organisation in the room has a stake in how the trajectory is described, the resulting picture unlikely to be honest enough to base the next design on.
- **A steering group sitting above the operational level.** One employer argued that safeguarding regular review moments belongs with a steering group rather than with operational staff, on the grounds that it can protect them when everyone else is too busy and can settle disagreements the operational partners cannot resolve between themselves.

2. Writing the theme into a multi-year policy agenda rather than running it as a pilot

IF a coalition's work depends on time-limited project funding, so that partners cannot assume it will still exist once that funding ends,

THEN the theme is written into the organisation's own policy and delivery agendas with a stated multi-year horizon and named target groups for later years,

LEADING TO the coordinator is held accountable for working to that agenda over several years rather than for delivering results within months, which protects the slow relational work from short-term delivery pressure,

AS A RESULT the approach can be extended to further sectors and further target groups rather than ending with the pilot.

Hindering context factors

- **Time-limited project funding with no answer about what follows.** Where a coalition runs on project money, who carries the work afterwards remains an open question throughout, and partners reluctant to build the arrangement into their own organisations while they cannot assume it will continue.
- **Capacity for a dedicated driver depending on local budget discretion.** Whether a region can pay someone to spend substantial time on this depends on what it can free up itself. A respondent working across regions identified this as the clearest difference between regions that progress and regions that stall.
- **Funding that requires a new coalition to be formed.** Where schemes fund the creation of new coalitions while the collaborations already working receive nothing, which one respondent called the wrong way round, effort goes into constituting structures rather than into the work.

Facilitating context factors

- **Organisational-level commitment to structural embedding.** Structural continuation requires the theme to be adopted beyond the project itself and incorporated into the organisation's core business. A board-level decision to make development pathways part of the organisation's regular work was described as an important step in moving the approach from a project-based initiative towards structural implementation.
- **An accountability horizon measured in years rather than months.** Where a coordinator is assessed on working to a multi-year agenda, the early relational work that produces no quick results can be done rather than skipped in favour of demonstrable short-term output.

The CMO configurations above can be summarized as requiring two processes (figure 7). One is to learn, evaluate and redesign. The other is to embed the coordinating function. For the latter, ownership, responsibility and governance, as well as resources are important for

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the success of this phase. It should be noted, though, that none of the Living Labs really entered this phase. There were intentions, but this phase was not really developed and little experience was gained.

6.2.5 Coalition mechanisms regarding inflow of jobseekers

Across the Living Labs, coalitions supported jobseeker inflow through coordination, knowledge sharing and improved matching between jobseekers and vacancies. These were the cross-cutting mechanisms to support jobseeker inflow facilitated by the coalition, where the employers' collaboration with education providers plays a prominent role (see Figure 8).

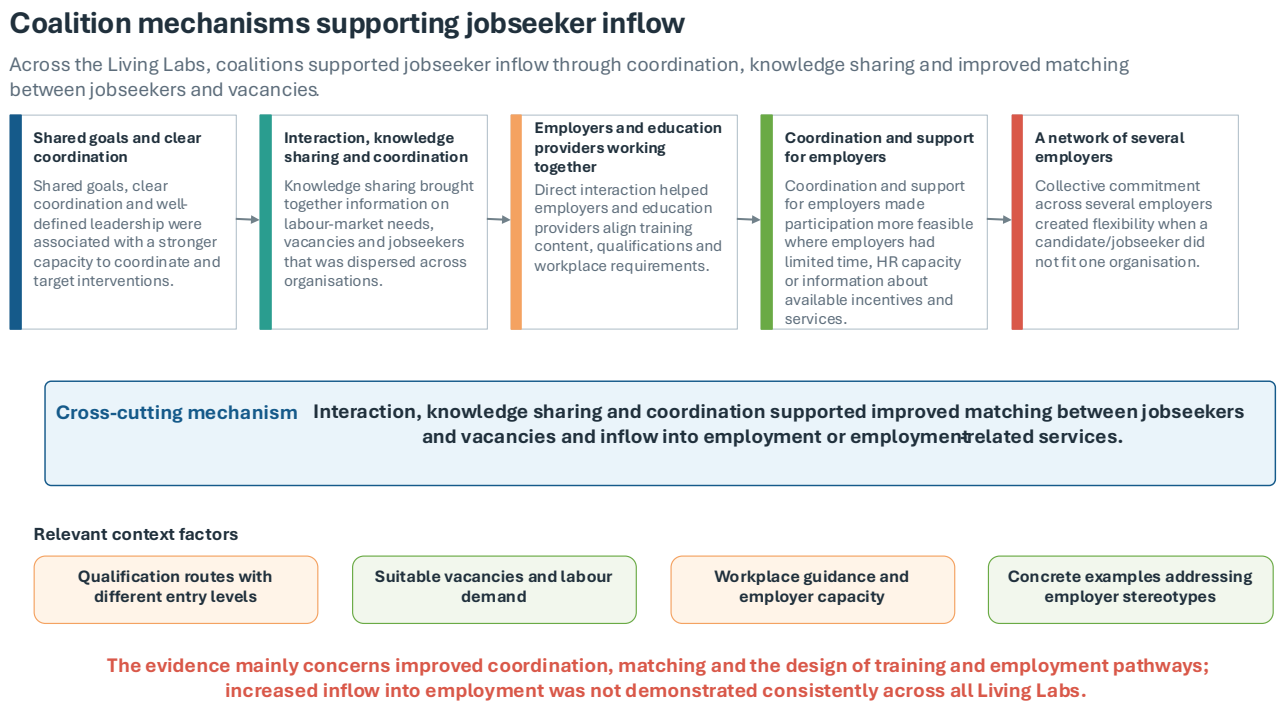

Figure 8 A summary of the coalition mechanisms found to support jobseeker inflow.

In this paragraph sevenal CMO's originating different Living Labs regarding the coalition (or role of coalition partners) and the inflow of jobseekers are addressed.

1. **Shared goals, clear coordination, and well-defined leadership are important for a coalition to facilitate jobseeker inflow**

IF stakeholders operate in a time-constrained, resource -limited and multi-network environment,

THEN a coalition with shared goals, clear coordination, and well-defined leadership roles can create structure, purpose, and alignment in collaborative work,

LEADING TO an improved capacity to coordinate and target interventions,

AS A RESULT the support of the labour market entry of vulnerable groups.

Hindering context factors

- Regional infrastructure deficits

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- lack of dedicated long-term funding.

Facilitating context factor

- Stable resource allocation for the lead coordinator.

2. Interaction, knowledge sharing and coordination can improve matching jobseekers to vacancies

IF information on labour market needs, vacancies, and jobseekers is dispersed across organisations and labour market mismatch persists,

THEN coalition-based interaction and knowledge sharing among relevant stakeholders,

LEADING TO creation of a shared understanding and better coordination,

AS A RESULT the matching between jobseekers and vacancies and inflow into employment or employment-related services are increased.

Hindering context factors

- Regional infrastructure deficits
- lack of dedicated long-term funding.

Facilitating context factor

- Stable resource allocation for the lead coordinating party.

An additional hindering factor in engaging organisations and their management or employers to join a coalition and hire people facing barriers to employment in their organisation may be ***the stigma*** *that holds on a specific target group*. From the interviews it became clear that it were often particularly employers or top-management who may hold stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards people facing barriers to employment.
The Bulgarian Living Lab tried to change the employers' mindset by organizing an initiative which was only focused on the specific target group (people 50+) to meet with a large group of employers and discuss their job positions one by one and convince them that at least part of them is suitable as employees in their organisations.

3. Labour market integration initiatives focused on a specific target group can change employers' mindset

IF people 50+ in Bulgaria are largely rejected by employers due to stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes,

THEN a focused initiative concentrated on this target group only would be able to meet with a large number of employers and discuss with them the feasibility of employing person aged 50+ at every job opening they have.

BECAUSE the specific and practical examples of where people 50+ can be employed is convincing employers in their general employability.

AS A RESULT employers' mindset can be changed and many positions for representatives of the target group can be opened.

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Hindering context factor

- People 50+ in Bulgaria are victims of widespread stereotypes and discrimination among the employers and younger generations as a whole. Many employers perceive them as less effective at work and unable to adapt to changing environment.

Facilitating context factor

- Some employers themselves are aged 50+ and sympathise with their generation. Many have already experienced the weaknesses of working collectives, composed of young people only, and/or praise some qualities of older workers as loyalty, maturity and professional experience.

The coalition may improve the collaboration between employers and education providers, resulting in improved and more taylor-made educational programmes which increase the likelihood that vulnerable jobseekers find a job and increased opportunities for matching jobseekers to a job that fits. Additionally, employers who collaborate together can also make sure that when a jobseeker does not fit in one place, he or she may find a fit more easily elsewhere. This may additionally be the case when these employers are active in the same sector. When employers work together in setting a framework which applies to jobseekers at entry of a job, which covers what they might do, how they are paid or supported, this may result in a more equal treatment. These mechanisms in which the coalition is beneficial to employer inflow are elaborated in the four CMO's below.

4. Providing a setting in which education and employers can question each other directly

> **IF** education providers and employers operate from structurally different institutional logics, with education assessed primarily on qualifications awarded and employers on whether someone can do the job, and they do not meet systematically without an intermediary,
>
> **THEN** the coalition organises sessions at which both are present, supported by a shared document stating aims and by a coordinator who translates between the two logics,
>
> **LEADING TO** each side appearing able to question the other's logic directly and to recognise a complementarity neither has seen alone,
>
> **AS A RESULT** a working connection forms between two systems that respondents suggest would otherwise not align structurally.

Hindering context factors

- **Schools and employers judged on different things.** Vocational schools are assessed largely on how many students obtain a qualification, while employers judge the same trajectory on whether they gained a colleague who can do the work. Both are legitimate aims, but they pull a design in different directions, and in this coalition's first trajectory the difference was never stated out loud and surfaced halfway through.
- **Partial membership of the coalition.** The education institution was difficult to keep attached and sector bodies only partly involved, which limits how far this brokering function can extend.
- **Guidance that thins after placement.** Where support from the school side falls away once a candidate is placed, the employer left carrying supervision it had not planned for, which may undermine the willingness this mechanism depends on.

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Facilitating context factors

- **A setting that does not exist otherwise.** Respondents suggest education and employers do not meet systematically without an intermediary, which would make the coalition itself the resource here that facilitates discussion between these two.
- **A coordinator who translates between the two logics.** Where practice previously varied by organisation, the coalition provides direction, which one respondent described as creating points of connection.

5. Binding several employers at once creates flexibility for candidates/jobseekers

IF employers each run trajectories separately without a shared network, so that none of them has anywhere to refer a candidate when a particular match does not work,

THEN the coalition creates a shared employer network with collective commitment across several organisations,

LEADING TO employers reason that a failed match need not be the end, because the candidate could be referred on within the collective, which lowers the risk each of them carries individually,

AS A RESULT a collective placement capacity can form that exceeds what individual placement can achieve.

Hindering context factors

- **Membership that carries no conditions.** Where nothing distinguishes an organisation that actively contributes from one that attends, it is unclear whether a referral request would actually be answered by the others.

Facilitating context factors

- **Several comparable providers facing the same shortage and motivation.** The local sector contains enough providers in a similar position for a collective arrangement to be available as an option rather than a bilateral deal.
- **A collective agreement that employers have co-signed.** Once the group has agreed and signed off on placing a certain kind of candidate, an individual organisation cannot then say it has no room for one, which is what would make a referral request answerable.
- **Existing contact between employers outside the meetings.** The informal contact described under regular convening is the channel through which such a referral would in practice run.

6. Deciding together what a trajectory is for, and whom it admits

IF coalition partners hold different ideas about what a trajectory should achieve, for example offering people a low-threshold chance to explore a sector while keeping their benefit, as against preparing them for paid work, and these aims have not been separated,

THEN the partners decide collectively what the trajectory is for, which entry route fits that aim, and whom it therefore admits, and they tell candidates plainly what the trajectory does and does not lead to,

LEADING TO partners being able to explain to each candidate/jobseeker why a route does or does not suit her, and candidates/jobseekers entering with expectations that match what the route can offer,

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AS A RESULT candidates/jobseekers are more likely to start on a route they can complete and that leads where they expected.

CONVERSELY where the door stays open to everyone without a shared decision about the aim, candidates/jobseekers enter routes that do not match their starting position, and those who do not reach the expected result may conclude that their time would have been better spent elsewhere.

Hindering context factors

- **Partners judged on different results.** One respondent in an employer interview described municipalities as wanting people in work, education as wanting diplomas and employers as wanting good employees. A diploma without sufficient command of the language may still fall short on the work floor.
- **A target group with widely varying language skills and work experience.** Where some candidates/jobseekers have worked only abroad and others have never worked, a single entry route is unlikely to fit everyone.

Facilitating context factors

- **Qualification routes with several entry levels and partial certificates.** Where the education system offers routes at different levels, a coalition can match candidates/jobseekers to a route instead of excluding them altogether.
- **A participant from outside the organising partners willing to name the tension.** The point was raised as feedback by a respondent working across regions who was not one of the organising partners.
- **A collective setting in which the choice can be made jointly.** A decision about admission is easier to hold when it has been taken by the group rather than by one partner.

7. Setting one framework for all candidates/jobseekers before placements begin

IF a coalition places a group of candidates/jobseekers with several organisations or locations at the same time, and each of these applies its own rules, while candidates'/jobseekers' financial arrangements also differ,

THEN the partners agree in advance on one framework that applies to every candidate/jobseeker, covering what candidates/jobseekers may and may not do, how they are paid or supported, and which partner is responsible for what, and they make this framework known from the first week,

LEADING TO candidates/jobseekers finding that their situation matches that of the others in their group, and partners being able to refer to the framework when a placement deviates from it,

AS A RESULT candidates/jobseekers are less likely to read differences between placements as unequal treatment, and the group can focus on the trajectory itself.

CONVERSELY where each placement sets its own terms, candidates who know each other well compare their situations, and differences that may be reasonable on their own become a source of unrest.

Hindering context factors

- **Income support rules that differ with each candidate's/jobseeker's situation.** National rules allow some candidates/jobseekers to keep a benefit while others have no entitlement.

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Unless a coalition sets a common rule, one trajectory therefore carries different financial conditions for people in the same group.

- **Placements spread across organisations or locations that each set their own practice.** Where decisions about daily arrangements sit with each location, differences arise without anyone intending them, and candidates are usually the first to notice.

Facilitating context factors

- **A partner that holds the financial arrangements in one place.** The employer adviser described her organisation as carrying the financial side of the trajectory. That makes it possible to set one rule centrally rather than negotiating it with each placement.
- **A partner willing to act as the driving force with all parties present.** The employer adviser suggested that uniformity follows when one partner takes the lead in bringing everyone together, rather than each employer arranging matters separately.
- **A first trajectory whose problems partners can name concretely.** Partners could draw on what they had seen go wrong in the pilot when agreeing what the framework should cover.

6.2.6 Coalition mechanisms regarding employee development and employee mobility

In this paragraph the mechanisms regarding employee development and will be presented. Figure 9 presents a summary of the findings on these topics in the Living Labs. In several Living Labs, employee mobility appeared less attractive to employers than employee development. Employers associated mobility with losing personnel, which is unattractive in times of staff shortage. Stimulating careers was also described as difficult in very small organizations and where the work offers few steps for promotion. Talent development, in contrast, was described as interesting, as employers saw it as a means to retain employees, both in situations of staff shortage and in small enterprises. The CMO configurations below illustrate these mechanisms further.

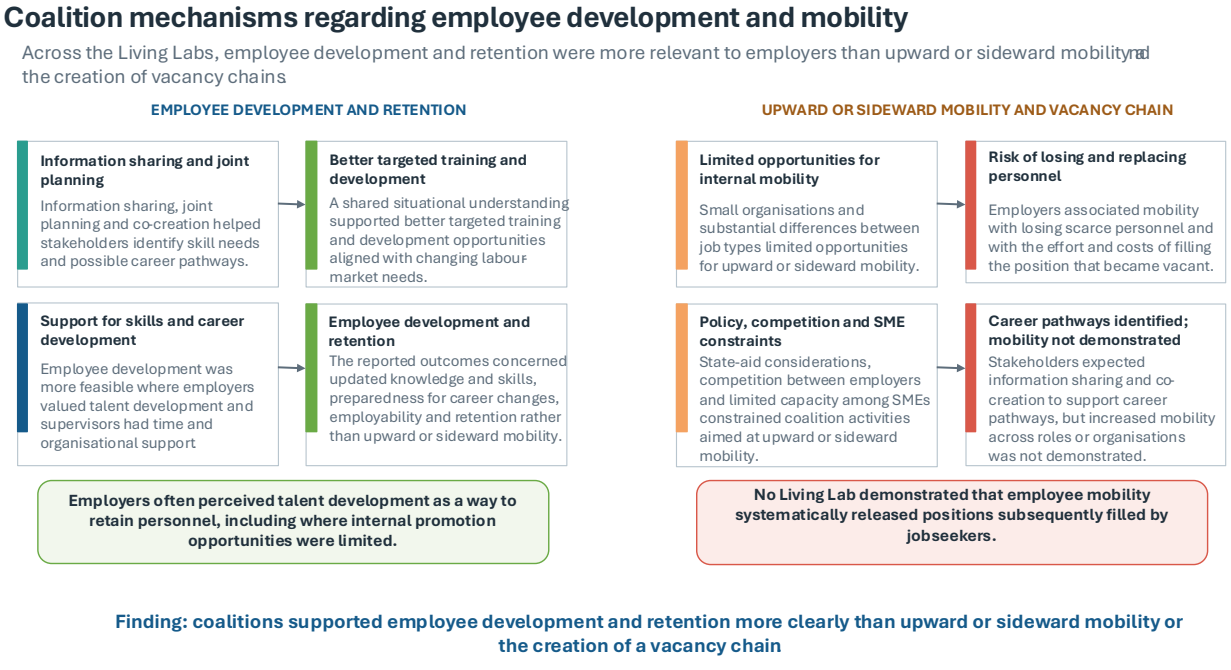

Figure 9 Summary of the coalition mechanisms found for employee development and mobility.

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In general, coalition members in Bulgaria expressed relatively pessimistic views regarding employee mobility than regarding the inflow of jobseekers.

1. Separating upskilling of employees from employer engagement helps supporting both sides, when the internal mobility is not feasible (within one organisation)

IF employers found internal promotion unfeasible or risky due to lengthy replacement processes, and both employees and employers experience challenges in the process of sideward or upward mobility within the same company,

THEN instead of linking training participation to internal mobility within the same organisation, the coalition separated support for the employees and support for the employers in different tracks,

LEADING TO an approach that did not require employers to take actions counteracting their business logic, while still supplied them with good practices; and gave opportunity to many employees to develop, regardless the practices of their employer,

AS A RESULT no upward or sideward mobility was an achieved outcome; but employers were more inclined to support older employees and older employees were better prepared for career changes.

Hindering context factors

- In many companies, the job positions differ significantly in terms of type of qualification and transitions within the company are hardly feasible. The training of the employees provided by the employer frequently is relevant for their current positions only.
- The majority of employers experience hardship to recruit candidates for the low-level, and not for medium- and high-level positions. Many companies are not interested in upskilling and reskilling of employees, but only in inflow of jobseekers.

Facilitating context factor

- Many older employees in Bulgaria experience job dissatisfaction and/or insecurity that attracted them to participate in the interventions on their own accord.

2. Policies hinder implementation of the ENGINE approach

IF the ENGINE model – which assumes that upskilling of employees in an organization creates vacancy chains for incoming jobseekers – requires large employers or non-competitive sectors to function,

THEN the lead organisation as a public-interest organisation cannot partner exclusively with a single employer due to state aid considerations, and is not able to partner with SMEs that predominate the region's employer landscape, for whom the business case does not hold,

LEADING TO coalition members who do not see upward or sideward mobility as a realistic or relevant goal within the current project design.

AS A RESULT there is no coalition-level outcome related to upward or sideward employee mobility.

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Hindering context factors

- Large companies from one and the same sector refrained from participating in common initiatives as Synclusive, as they were afraid that some sensitive information about their companies might be revealed to competitors.
- For SMEs, the effort and cost of training one person to move up and then backfilling their position was felt disproportionate for a small company.

Facilitating context factor

- Older employees feel the need and have strong desire to develop.
- Many like their organisations, are loyal to their employers, and would prefer internal career development instead of taking risk to move elsewhere.

In the Finnish stakeholder interviews, less information was available on initiatives aimed at improving employee mobility. Their stakeholders highlighted information sharing, joint planning, and co-creation as key mechanisms that can help identify potential career pathways, develop more targeted training and professional development opportunities, and thereby promote mobility across roles both within and between organisations in the future.

3. Information sharing, joint planning, and co-creation are not only key mechanisms in coalition building and maintenance but also in identifying career paths.

IF stakeholders have limited resources to promote career mobility independently,

THEN active participation in the coalition can facilitate information sharing, coordination, and joint planning,

LEADING TO the identification of career pathways,

AS A RESULT in the long-term increased employee mobility across roles and organisations.

Hindering context factors

- The organisations in the coalition have little opportunity for developing promotion within the organization.
- The participating organisations are very small (SME's).

Facilitating context factor

- The employer(s) consider(s) talent development important in supporting and promoting retention of their personnel.
- The organisations in the coalition have an active sector organization which has good relations with the employers, is trusted and facilitatesmobility among different organisations.

4. A coalition of diverse stakeholders can co-design measures to better match their workforce to the changing labour market needs.

IF structural changes in the labour market and evolving skill requirements create uncertainty and there are resource constraints,

THEN a coalition of diverse stakeholders working together can build a shared situational understanding and co-design measures that better match their workforce to the changing labour market needs,

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LEADING TO better targeted training and development opportunities as well as opportunities for career transitions and workforce mobility,

AS A RESULT a workforce with up-to-date knowledge and skills, ready for the changed needs of the labour market.

Hindering context factors

- The participating organisations are very small (SME's) and have little time to put into the coalition.

Facilitating context factor

- The employer(s) consider(s) talent development important in supporting and promoting retention of their personnel.
- The organisations in the coalition have an active sector organization which has good relations with the employers, is trusted and facilitates mobility among different organisations.

6.3 Realist evaluation results on the individual-level

Individual-level CMO configurations were formulated, particularly on the design and implementation of training jobseekers and employees in Bulgaria, Finland and Portugal. This training was directed at the jobseekers and employees to develop specific skills as well as to self-efficacy in job search behaviour. In Finland and in the Netherlands individual-level CMO's have also been formulated on the supervisor training, which in both cases was directed at the supervisors but these were aimed to develop the talents of their employees. In Finland, jobseekers received TAITE coaching and some jobseekers received IPS training. In the Netherlands the migrant women reveived a taylormade training combining theory and practice in the childcare facility. Interviews were held with these migrant women, but CMO's could not be constructed based in these interviews because of poor understanding of the Dutch language.

In 6.4 CMO's were selected which may have general implications for the target groups, particularly regarding skills. The quantitative analyses already showed us that most of the findings which had impact generally were close to the aims and content of the training.

6.3.1 Individual-level mechanisms directed at jobseekers and employees

For the individual-level mechanisms directed at jobseekers and employees the same procedure is applied as for the previous coalition-level topics. The CMO-information in the national reports on the individual-level mechanisms (see appendices 1 to 4) are also used to make an AI generated summary figure (see figure 10). This figure shows six main CMO-relationships where content specific characteristics of the intervention lead to a (proximal) outcome through a specific reasoning or mechanism. We do see some training (and country specific) relationships in these CMO reationships.

The content specific characteristics of the interventions vary, reflecting the differences between the interventions (see figure 10). In Finland, the TAITE and IPS training sessions were directed only at jobseekers. This training is mainly directed at strengthening job-search skills and self-efficacy in job-search behaviour, using peer learning.

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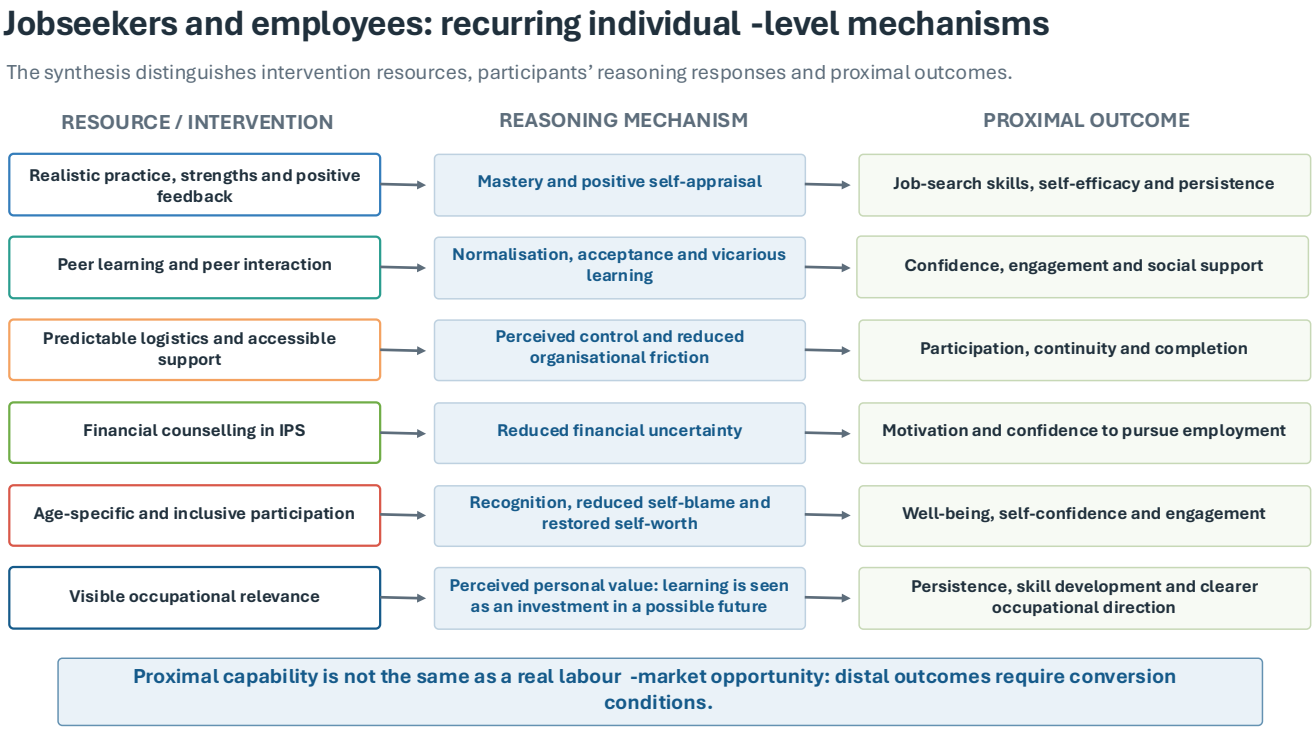

Figure 10 Summarising the individual-level mechanisms.

The training offered in Bulgaria and Portugal was mainly aimed to develop skills (in Bulgaria these were digital skills, green skills and personal and soft skills; in Portugal these were digital skills, employability skills and management skills), and were addressed to both jobseekers and employees.

The IPS-training with its financial counselling ingredient stands out separately as a Finnish intervention. The other overarching individual-level mechanisms appear somewhat more mixed, not specific to a specific training, although the age-specific and inclusive participation are specific to the Bulgarian Living Lab.

Below, a total of 13 CMO's are presented to illustrate these six overarching mechanisms. Because the Finnish Living Lab specifically addresses jobseekers, these will be presented first. Followed by the CMO's identified for the Bulgarian and Portuguese Living Lab addressed at both jobseekers and employees.

Taite-coaching in Finland

Taite-coaching is the latest Finnish adaptation of the JOBS© peer group-based method, which has been shown to effectively strengthen the job-search skills and mental well-being of unemployed individuals.

1. Practising real-life job-search situations, identifying strengths, and giving positive feedback build skills, positive self-perception and confidence in job seeking

> **IF** jobseekers have been unemployed for a long time and have weak job-search skills and low confidence in themselves and their employment prospects,

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THEN practical TAITE job search training build their skills, positive self-perception and confidence in job-seeking,

LEADING TO opportunities to practice real-life job search situations, identifies participants' existing strengths, and provides supportive feedback from peers and instructors,

AS A RESULT participants' more active and persistent efforts to find employment and, ultimately better possibilities of obtaining a job.

Hindering context factors

- Prolonged unemployment has typically has a negative effect on many participants' self-perceptions and their self-esteem and confidence in finding a job.
- They may believe that they do not have any strengths or skills relevant to the labour market.

Facilitating context factor

- Many of them are motivated to find a job and therefore also motivated to participate in the training.

2. Support and encouragement from peers and instructors create a feeling of being accepted

IF jobseekers face significant health or work ability challenges, lack confidence in their ability to find a job, and are not motivated to pursue employment,

THEN peer-group support and encouragement and exercises focusing on positive rather than challenges and difficulties, may enhance participants' sense of being accepted,

LEADING TO shared experiences which can normalise difficulties,

AS A RESULT feelings of failure are reduced, activity levels are increased and alternative paths forward beyond employment are helped to identify.

Hindering context factor

- Training that enhances job search skills and offers support and encouragement may be less effective for participants who lack genuine motivation to find employment, face major health or work-ability challenges, or are not required to seek work. The training cannot create motivation for job seeking if it is entirely absent.

Facilitating context factor

- Peer support and encouragement appeared particularly relevant because jobseekers usually receive support only from job coaches. Peer support was a new element for them that contributed to normalization.

3. Practicing job search situations in Finnish within an encouraging group increases migrants' skills and confidence to use Finnish language

IF jobseekers have an immigrant background and limited Finnish language skill,

THEN peer-group-based TAITE coaching that provides and encouraging atmosphere and opportunities to practice job-search situations in Finnish may improves their confidence and skills,

LEADING TO encouragement of participants to use Finnish and reduces the stress they associate with job searching in a foreign language,

AS A RESULT improved chances of finding employment.

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Hindering context factor

- Training may offer less added value for highly educated immigrants. They often possess strong professional skills and may need more specialized guidance from instructors on their job-search process – guidance that peers with more severe challenges cannot provide. Consequently, without tailoring, the training may not substantially improve their employment prospects.

Facilitating context factors

- A positive and encouraging atmosphere in the training group encourages participants with an immigrant background to speak Finnish during the training sessions.
- The training provided opportunities to practice job search in real-life situations in Finnish, which increased their skills and confidence to cope with job-search situations in Finnish and reduced the stress they associated with searching for work in foreign language.

IPS-coaching

For those jobseekers who needed more intense and specialised individualised support, IPS (Individual Placement and Support)-coaching was provided.
The implementation of IPS-coaching did not proceed as intended. Staff turnover among job coaches led to interruptions in service delivery. Employment opportunities were not fully explored, and clients may not have been sufficiently informed or engaged, leading some to discontinue participation. Monitoring the service also proved challenging: response rates to questionnaires were low, and changes in instructors disrupted the data collection process. After six months, the employment services decided to discontinue the intervention.

Despite the discontinuation of this intervention, coaching support of jobseekers who have multiple problems does appear to be important and may well be effective. IPS coaching included financial counselling provided by job coaches. This counselling reduced participants' stress and uncertainty about their financial situation and increased their motivation and confidence in pursuing employment.

4. Financial counselling reduces stress and uncertainty and increases motivation and confidence in employment

IF jobseekers experience financial difficulties and rely on multiple social benefits for their livelihood,

THEN IPS coaching provides accurate financial counselling and support in coordinating benefits with earned income, thereby reducing fear that employment will destabilize their financial situation,

LEADING TO lower level of stress and improved motivation and confidence in employment,

AS A RESULT to more positive attitude toward employment and improved motivation for active job seeking.

Hindering context factor

- Taking on a new job while having benefits, may actually result in a drop in income and may eventually even result in loss of the right to be entitled to a benefit. People may have to go

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through the whole process of becoming entitled to income benefits again. This is called the 'poverty trap'.

Facilitating context factors

- Financial counselling appeared particularly relevant because prolonged unemployment often leads to a gradual deterioration of an individual's financial situation, eventually exhausting any savings.

In the Living Labs of Bulgaria and Portugal, the jobseekers and employees could subscribe to the same training sessions. Despite slight differences in relevant context factors in Bulgaria, the CMO-configurations were not very different for jobseekers and employees.

In Bulgaria (Appendix 1), relevant CMO-configurations were identified related to the specific focus on group, experienced trainers, specific training features, the group environment and additional support. Some prominent CMO-configurations:

5. Age-specific focus strengthened mental well-being and engagement

IF people aged 50+ experienced age-related disadvantage, employer reluctance, social isolation, or discouragement, while remaining motivated to stay active and competitive,

THEN initiatives explicitly designed for their age group could foster trust, recognition, and engagement by addressing their specific social, psychological, and skills-related needs,

LEADING TO such targeted provision made participants feel understood, valued, and socially included while responding to their specific circumstances.

AS A RESULT their mental health, psychological well-being, and self-esteem improved, alongside increased engagement with relevant training and qualification opportunities.

Hindering context factor

- People aged 50+ seeking new employment often felt that their age group was overlooked by society and encountered perceived employer reluctance to recruit older workers, which contributed to feelings of rejection, isolation, and discouragement

Facilitating context factor

- The increasing labour market activity of people aged 50+ had become more widely recognised by employers and society, while older adults themselves were motivated to remain active, keep up with labour market developments, and compare their skills and opportunities with those of their peers.

6. Inclusive participation restored self-confidence and motivation

IF people aged 50+ lacked confidence in their ability to learn in unfamiliar fields and associated training with previous classroom experiences,

THEN providing an inclusive environment in which everyone could express themselves, answer questions, and share their experiences helped them recognise their existing knowledge and become active participants in the learning process,

LEADING TO a shift in attention from knowledge deficits to existing strengths and provision of secure foundation for further learning.

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AS A RESULT trainees regained self-confidence and demonstrated greater engagement and motivation.

Hindering context factor

- Many people aged 50+ had not participated in training for a long time and associated training with traditional school-based classroom experiences. They also lacked confidence in their ability to cope with unfamiliar fields requiring a broad range of skills.

Facilitating context factor

- Trainees had many questions extending beyond the initially announced topics, creating opportunities for active participation and sharing of experiences.

7. Hybrid training enhanced participation and completion

IF potential trainees faced limited free time, work responsibilities, or inconvenient training locations,

THEN hybrid training provided flexible participation options while preserving opportunities for face-to-face interaction and peer contact,

LEADING TO flexibility which reduced practical barriers and allowed participants to choose formats compatible with their individual circumstances.

AS A RESULT training was more likely to be successfully attended and completed and could benefit a broader range of participants.

Hindering context factor

- Potential trainees faced inconvenient training locations, physical disabilities, competing responsibilities, and limited free time, particularly when they were employed.

Facilitating context factors

- Not identified.

8. Peer experience exchange reduced self-blame and restored self-confidence

IF older people experienced isolation, discouragement, and loss of confidence after unsuccessful attempts to improve their situation,

THEN exchanging experiences with peers facing similar challenges enabled mutual identification and learning from different responses to shared difficulties,

LEADING TO similar experiences in others which normalised participants' circumstances and reduced self-blame by demonstrating that their difficulties reflected broader barriers rather than personal failure.

AS A RESULT participants regained self-confidence and motivation, improved their psychological well-being and social orientation, and became better able to articulate and pursue their learning and employment goals.

Hindering context factor

- Some older people had lost social contacts and experienced isolation, depression, or discouragement. Others had repeatedly attempted to improve their situation without

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success, contributing to self-blame, worry, diminished confidence and motivation, and, in some cases, difficulty articulating their goals and aspirations.

Facilitating context factor

- The training group included peers who faced similar labour market challenges, experiences of isolation, and barriers to employment, while also bringing diverse experiences, perspectives, and coping strategies. This combination of shared circumstances and diverse responses created favourable conditions for identification, mutual understanding, and meaningful experience exchange.

9. Peer information exchange and connections built partnerships, networks and job prospects

IF people facing similar labour market challenges participated together in training, particularly where shared professional interests facilitated connection,

THEN exchanging ideas, information, and experiences with peers fostered mutual support, trust, and lasting professional relationships,

LEADING TO exchanges providing new perspectives, strengthened motivation, and creating networks through which opportunities and resources could continue to circulate.

AS A RESULT participants were encouraged to pursue further development, support one another beyond the training, and increase their opportunities for employment or professional collaboration.

Hindering context factor

- Some participants pursuing business or self-employment opportunities lacked support from their families. Previous experience of teamwork also varied, potentially influencing participants' readiness to recognise and engage with the benefits of peer collaboration.

Facilitating context factor

- Participants faced similar labour market challenges, while shared professional backgrounds or interests facilitated meaningful exchange and potential collaboration. The dynamic labour market, characterised by continuously emerging actors and opportunities, increased the potential value of new professional connections and information exchange.

To evaluate the individual-level findings across the Portuguese Living Lab, qualitative evidence was considered across the three regional sub-coalitions: Lisboa, Évora, Lagoa, and the National Digital patform. Although these regional hubs operate in different economic and institutional contexts, ranging from urban academic and technology ecosystems to rural agritech and service- or tourism-oriented settings, the cross-case analysis makes it possible to identify recurring Context–Mechanism–Outcome patterns.

10. Shared learning rebuilds confidence. – This CMO is shared by both jobseekers and employees

IF jobseekers or employees enter training with limited confidence in their ability to complete unfamiliar tasks,

THEN learning formats that provide structured peer interaction enable them to recognise that difficulties are shared and manageable,

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LEADING TO observing and collaborating with others normalises uncertainty and strengthens self-efficacy,

AS A RESULT more active participation, greater persistence, and sustained engagement in learning.

Hindering context factor

- Isolated or poorly facilitated learning environments; limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction; weak communication between participants; and low initial confidence that remains unaddressed within the group.

Facilitating context factor

- Learning environments that actively promote peer exchange; structured opportunities for collaborative work; group discussion spaces; and session formats that allow participants to learn from questions and difficulties raised by others.

11. Tangible practice, tangible confidence: hands-on tasks and visible progress – CMO for employees

IF employees participate in training involving skills or technologies with which they have limited previous experience,

THEN hands-on activities and the production of visible outputs enable them to recognise their capacity to learn and apply new competencies,

LEADING TO successful task completion generates a sense of mastery and applied competence,

AS A RESULT stronger professional self-confidence, increased adaptability, and greater willingness to use new skills in future work-related contexts.

Hindering context factor

- Abstract or predominantly theoretical content; insufficient time to complete or improve practical outputs; overly rapid delivery; and weak connections between training activities and potential professional application.

Facilitating context factor

- Course designs that emphasise learning by doing; practical tasks connected to employees' professional environments; opportunities to develop visible outputs; adequate time for experimentation and improvement; and trainer feedback that helps participants recognise their progress.

12. Friction down, participation up: reliable logistics and accessible support – CMO fo jobseekers

IF jobseekers combine training with educational, personal, or job-search commitments and have limited capacity to absorb additional organisational difficulties,

THEN predictable schedules, reliable access arrangements, and responsive support reduce the practical burden of participation,

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LEADING TO these resources preserve participants' sense of control and prevent frustration from accumulating,

AS A RESULT greater continuity, sustained engagement, and a higher likelihood of course completion.

Hindering context factor

- Competing personal or academic obligations; unreliable technical infrastructure; unclear access procedures; changes communicated at short notice; and slow or unavailable responses when participants encounter difficulties.

Facilitating context factor

- Clear and responsive communication channels; predictable scheduling; course timetables compatible with educational, personal, or job-search commitments; accessible trainer support; and reliable digital platforms.

13. Interest alignment fuels engagement: connecting content to aspiration – CMO for jobseekers

IF jobseekers enter training with an existing interest in a particular field or uncertainty about their future occupational direction,

THEN content that makes its professional relevance and practical applications visible strengthens perceived personal value,

LEADING TO participants interpret learning as an opportunity to invest in and assess possible career pathways,

AS A RESULT greater engagement, persistence, skill development, and clearer occupational orientation.

Hindering context factor

- Limited initial interest; weak connections between training content and participants' aspirations; superficial curriculum content; and a perceived disconnect between acquired skills and realistic local labour market opportunities.

Facilitating context factor

- Pre-existing curiosity about the training domain; visible connections between course content and occupations; practical examples of professional application; opportunities to explore different roles; and content related to viable employment or further training pathways.

6.3.2 Individual-level mechanisms directed at the supervisor

Overarching individual-level mechanisms on the supervisor training are based on the national reports from Finland and the Netherlands. Five mechanisms were identified linking specific training ingredients to outcomes (figure 11). The relevant training content appeared highly specific for the training, but the mechanisms appeared not to be so different from those identified in the individual-level mechanisms we saw earlier for jobseeker and employee training.

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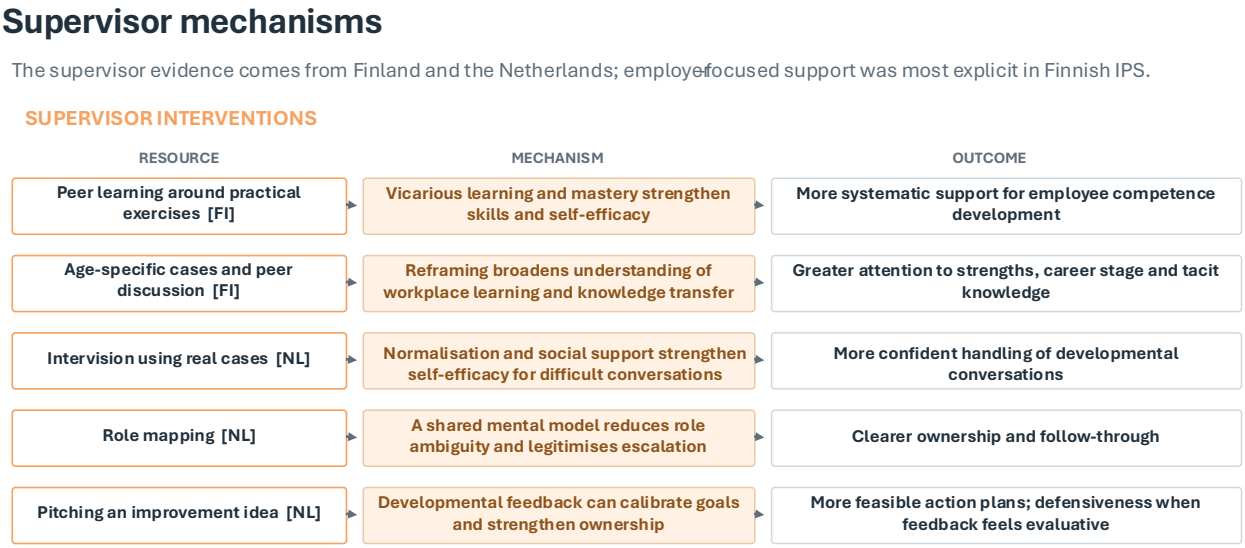

Figure 11 Summarises the CMO configurations from the supervisor training in Finland and the Netherlands and an employer-related CMO regarding the IPS training

CMO's illustrating the relations in the summary table are shown below:

In the Finnish Living Lab, for individual-level intervention (IPS) directed at people facing structural barriers to employment to have the intended impact, it was perceived that reaching out to (potential) employers was felt important.

1. Active communication and available support for employers reduce hesitation and increase confidence in the hiring process

> **IF** employers are willing to hire people in vulnerable situations but have limited knowledge of the incentives, services and support available to them,
>
> **THEN** the employer-focused support in IPS coaching meaning that job coaches are easily accessible and provide employers with relevant information and services,
>
> **LEADING TO** reduction in employers' uncertainty and hesitation regarding recruitment-related risks and increase their trust and confidence in the hiring process,
>
> **AS A RESULT** employers showed a greater willingness to hire people in vulnerable situations.

Hindering context factors

- Despite the fact that employers are willing to take social responsibility and hire people facing barriers to employment, they may perceive the risks of hiring as too high or have limited trust in the recruitment process, which in turn can reduce their willingness to offer employment.
- If job coaches do not take an active approach by building employer contacts or maintaining regular communication with employers, then, even if employers are initially interested in hiring people in vulnerable situations, they will not receive the information or support they need to follow through.

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Facilitating context factor

- Some employers wish to take social responsibility by offering jobs and training opportunities to jobseekers in (very) vulnerable situations. However, they may lack information about the financial incentives or other support mechanisms available to them when hiring someone in a vulnerable position.

Both in Finland as well in the Netherlands, the multi-level intervention package include a supervisor training which was aimed at promoting the development of competencies or talents in their employees. Supervisors often influence both employees' access to developmental opportunities and the psychological climate that encourages self-directed career behaviour. Thus, their role in supporting the competence development, and employability of their subordinates is critical.

Discussions with the City of Kokkola were initiated to explore ways of providing support for employees within the organisation, especially those in a vulnerable labour market position (e.g., individuals with lower educational levels). Competence development was identified as a major goal in the human resources strategy. While the organisation implemented various programs and methods for skill development, there was no guidance or support for supervisors on how to approach competence and career development within their work communities or how to provide support at the team level. In Finland the training was developed for the City of Kokkola and was targeted at all voluntary supervisors to maximise reach and to build consistent leadership capabilities across units. Supervisors from several different sectors, such as early childhood education, technical and environmental services, cultural services, cleaning and catering, and human resource enrolled in the training program. This cross-sector participation enabled supervisors to share ideas and knowledge about their current development practices as well as their role in promoting employee development, with colleagues from various units and occupational fields.

Many supervisors have extensive leadership experience. However, they may lack tools for providing individualised support to employees, relying instead on one-size-fits-all guidance. In addition, supervisory work is often characterised by high time pressure which creates barriers for team-level competence development. Typically, supervisors perceive workplace skill and competence development through formal development structures and practices. Therefore, increasing their knowledge and understanding of more informal, on-the-job learning practices would be highly beneficial.

Below several CMO's illustrating the CMO-configurations identified for the supervisor training are presented.

2. Peer learning around practical exercises improves skills and self-efficacy and leads to change in supervisory roles and practices

> **IF** supervisors have a development-oriented mindset and feel responsible for competence development,
>
> **THEN** peer learning that supports vicarious learning by incorporating practical examples and collaborative problem-solving in the context of supervisory work
>
> **LEADING TO**, improved skills and self-efficacy in supporting skills development of employees,

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AS A RESULT changes in supervisory practices will happen by promoting employees' active role in competence development and integrating competence development more systematically into discussions with subordinates.

Hindering context factors

- In their normal working situation, supervisors have little contact with each other and information exchange is very limited or even absent.
- Supervisory work is characterised by high time pressure, and both everyday problem-solving and the acquisition of new competencies largely depend on the supervisor's own initiative.

Facilitating context factor

- Participating supervisors viewed competence development as a central aspect of managerial work and demonstrated a development- and change-oriented mindset.

3. Peer learning around practical exercises broadens understanding of age-specific competencies and knowledge transfer and changes performance and development discussions

IF supervisors engage in peer learning through discussions and concrete case examples related to age-differences in competence development and knowledge sharing,

THEN their mindsets regarding competence management broadens,

LEADING TO changes in supervisory practices,

AS A RESULT showing more explicit attention to competencies and strengths within the work community, as well as improved transfer of tacit knowledge between employees.

Hindering context factors

- The supervisor had extensive work experience in developing and managing employees' competencies may benefit but also hinder acquiring new insights.

Facilitating context factor

- The training supported the realisation that learning occurs in everyday work, not only in formal training contexts, and that the same approaches to competence development do not apply equally to younger and older employees.
- The supervisors also came to understand that employees at different career stages may not always be equally motivated or able to consistently invest energy in competence development.

In the Netherlands' Living Lab a middle-large childcare organization was coalition partner, which stimulated both the inflow of migrant women seeking a job and collaborated in the co-design of a development-oriented leadership training, aimed at their supervisors. Indirectly the target group for this supervisor training was the employees of the organization, and their ultimate goal was not so much to stimulate employee mobility, but to retain these employees in the tight regional labour market. Staff shortages in the childcare sector were a major reason for the employer to decide on having this course for her supervisors.

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The supervisor role is described as a hybrid function: supervisors carry responsibility for the team and location functioning, while also dealing with practical constraints and continuity. In some cases, the role is explicitly “meewerkend” (working on the group several afternoons) alongside coordination tasks, which reduces slack time and forces constant prioritisation (“what is important now and what can wait”).

The intervention took place against an organisational setting in which the supervisor role is already being discussed as something that will “change.” At least one supervisor explicitly links this to being involved in a workgroup about the future role of supervisors, indicating that role development was a live organisational topic before and during implementation.

This setting is an important context for mechanisms around role clarity and ownership: role questions were not only individual uncertainty, but embedded in a broader trajectory of redefining what the organisation expects from supervisors.
A recurring starting condition is that supervisors have limited structured time to speak with other supervisors. Supervisors describe that they “never” speak to each other and that even when there are meetings, these often function as agenda-driven coordination rather than time for meaningful exchange. This contributes to a baseline situation of working on an “island,” even though supervisors recognise that others face similar issues.

There was some similarity in the importance of some of the mechanisms, as well as specificity as compared to the situation of the Finnish supervisor training and CMO’s:

4. Peer learning strengthens social support and self-efficacy for difficult conversations

> **IF** supervisors have limited peer contact and leadership work is normally experienced as isolated,
>
> **THEN** peer learning through intervision may strengthen social support and self-efficacy,
>
> **LEADING TO** shared cases can normalise challenges and provide workable examples and language,
>
> **AS A RESULT** more confident handling of difficult conversations.

Hindering context factors

- Peer learning may be less effective when group dynamics reduce seriousness or openness (lack of psychological safety), or when participants experience large differences in experience/level that make exchange feel less applicable. It may also add less value for supervisors who already feel highly experienced or well-supported informally.

Facilitating context factor

- This mechanism seemed particularly relevant because normally, supervisors have limited routine time to exchange experiences with other supervisors and experience leadership work as locally isolated. It also appeared to hinge on whether the group climate allowed people to share real cases and uncertainties openly (*psychological safety*).

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5. Role-mapping reduced role ambiguity and support follow-through on coordination issues

IF responsibilities for employee development and escalation are not fully formalised **and** supervisors experience the role-mapping exercise as relevant (rather than redundant) and are open to adjusting their usual approach,

THEN role-mapping may reduce role ambiguity and support follow-through,

LEADING TO building a shared mental model of role boundaries and legitimise clarification and escalation,

AS A RESULT more actionable coordination and clearer next steps.

Hindering context factors

- For supervisors who either (a) experienced the role-mapping as offering little new value, or (b) relied strongly on entrenched routines in how they handle issues, the exercise was less likely to translate into new behaviour.

Facilitating context factor

- This mechanism seemed to particularly be triggered because responsibilities were not always already formalized, as well as when supervisors experience recurring uncertainty about "who owns what" around employee development or escalation routes.

6. The pitch exercise appeared to calibrate improvement goals and strengthen ownership (or trigger defensiveness if misaligned)

IF supervisors are required to pitch a concrete improvement idea in a context where feedback is experienced as coaching-oriented and expectations are aligned,

THEN the pitch exercise may strengthen ownership and feasibility of action plans,

LEADING TO upward feedback which helps calibrate goals and clarify next steps,

AS A RESULT goals calibrated and next steps clarified.

Hindering context factors

- The pitch was held back when, (1) the climate was perceived as evaluative or punitive (*evaluative threat*), (2) expectations about the purpose of the pitch were not aligned (*role/goal ambiguity*), (3) staffing pressure and instability made implementation feel unrealistic (*overload; low capacity*), and (4) line management changed frequently, weakening relationships and continuity, so supervisors were less sure how feedback would be received and what standardsapplied (*low relational continuity; reduced trust*).

Facilitating context factor

- This mechanism was more likely to be triggered when there was (1) a learning-oriented climate where improvement was treated as development rather than judgement (*learning orientation*), and/or (2) a baseline of trust and approachability between supervisors and management (*psychological safety*), and/or (3) shared expectations that the pitch was meant to refine feasibility (*expectation alignment*), and (4) enough operational stability to make follow-through feel realistic (*implementation capacity*) existed.

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6.4 Summary of the realist evaluation findings

The realist evaluation addressed three groups of research questions:

- **Coalition level:** Which mechanisms contributed to coalition building, maintenance and institutionalisation, under which national and regional conditions, and with which outcomes?
- **Individual level:** Which mechanisms contributed to outcomes among jobseekers, employees and supervisors, for whom and under which circumstances?
- **ENGINE implementation:** How and to what extent were the three core elements of ENGINE implemented: coalition building, a multi-level intervention package, and co-design and co-implementation?

Across these research questions, the findings show that outcomes depended not only on the resources provided, but also on how coalition partners, employers and participants responded to these resources within their organisational, institutional and labour-market contexts.

Coalition-level findings: mechanisms, contexts and outcomes

Regarding the first group of research questions, coalition formation generally started from existing relationships and personal trust. A concrete shared problem, such as staff shortages or increasing unemployment, skills gaps or labour-market mismatch, helped partners recognise the value of collaboration. However, trust and shared ambitions were insufficient to produce coordinated action. Effective coalition functioning also required a coordinator, clear roles and mandates, concrete proposals, visible follow-up and sufficient authority among participating representatives.

Coalitions facilitated employer participation when they reduced administrative and coordinating burdens, provided a recognisable point of contact and adapted expectations to employers' capacity. Regular contact, continuity of representatives, neutral facilitation and examples from comparable organisations further supported trust, learning and commitment. Institutionalisation required responsibilities and resources to become embedded in participating organisations rather than remaining dependent on individual relationships and temporary project funding.

The national and regional conditions under which these mechanisms operated differed substantially. Governance structures determined the scope for regional adaptation, while labour-market conditions, employer size, public funding and training systems shaped what coalitions could achieve. Employer willingness did not necessarily imply sufficient capacity: limited HR resources, supervision costs, administrative burdens and a lack of suitable positions frequently constrained participation.

The most consistent coalition-level outcomes were improved coordination, stronger relationships, shared understanding and adaptation of intervention pathways. Coalitions also helped connect resources held by different organisations. Evidence of structural changes in employer practices, completed institutionalisation, systematic employee mobility or policy reform was more limited. Several continuation arrangements were still emerging at the final data collection.

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Individual-level findings: mechanisms, contexts and outcomes

Regarding the second group of research questions, practical exercises, positive feedback and visible progress generated mastery experiences and strengthened confidence among jobseekers and employees. Peer interaction helped normalise difficulties, reduce self-blame and support mutual learning. Training was more likely to generate engagement when participants recognised its relevance to their aspirations or work and when delivery was accessible, flexible and reliably organised.

These mechanisms did not work equally for all participants or under all circumstances. Low confidence could increase the value of peer support and practical success, but participants facing severe health, financial or work-ability barriers often required more individualised support. Language proficiency, previous education, occupational background and access to suitable learning formats also influenced participation and outcomes.

Supervisor interventions operated through partly similar mechanisms. Peer exchange and practical cases supported reflection, vicarious learning and confidence in developmental conversations. Role clarification and concrete improvement plans could strengthen ownership and follow-through. These mechanisms were facilitated by psychological safety, a learning-oriented climate and organisational stability, but constrained by time pressure, unclear expectations and changing management relationships.

The most consistent individual-level outcomes were proximal outcomes: stronger confidence, skills, motivation, preparedness, engagement and awareness. Employment, retention and mobility depended more strongly on additional conditions, including recognised qualifications, suitable vacancies, employer support and opportunities to apply acquired capabilities.

Implementation of the three core elements of ENGINE

Regarding the third research question, the three core elements of ENGINE were implemented unevenly. First, coalitions were established or strengthened in all Living Labs, but they often depended on a small operational core rather than the active involvement of all coalition members. Second, multi-level intervention packages were implemented primarily at individual level and partly at organisational level. Connections with institutional and policy-level change remained limited. Activities at different levels did not automatically form an integrated pathway: explicit and feasible connections were needed between individual development, organisational practices and labour-market opportunities. Third, co-design and co-implementation mainly took the form of adapting existing interventions and implementation arrangements. Decision-making was generally concentrated among lead organisations and other core partners, while direct involvement of target groups in intervention design was more limited.

The full vacancy-chain assumption underlying ENGINE was not demonstrated. Employee development did not systematically lead to mobility that released positions subsequently filled by jobseekers. In shortage sectors, vacancies already existed and employee development was more relevant to retention than to vacancy creation. In SME-

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dominated settings, limited internal career pathways and replacement capacity further constrained mobility.

Overall, the findings support ENGINE as a flexible multi-level framework rather than as one fixed causal pathway. Depending on the context, relevant pathways may include direct jobseeker entry, employee development and retention, stronger supervisor or employer capacity, and improved coordination between services, education providers and employers. Coalition building and individual development were both important, but neither was sufficient alone. Sustainable labour-market inclusion required connections with recognised development pathways, organisational capacity and real employment opportunities.

7. Overarching findings of the quantitative and qualitative analyses

This chapter integrates the quantitative and realist findings. It first considers what the two forms of evidence show about change among jobseekers, employees and supervisors. It then examines how coalition functioning shaped the individual-level interventions, assesses the three core elements of ENGINE, and discusses maintenance and sustainability. The synthesis distinguishes proximal outcomes, such as skills, confidence and preparedness, from distal outcomes, such as employment, retention and mobility, which depend on additional organisational and labour-market conditions.

7.1 Reflecting on the quantitative and qualitative analyses

The quantitative evaluation did not show a uniform pattern of statistically significant change across common outcomes. The clearest findings concerned outcomes close to intervention content: job-search self-efficacy after TAITE in Finland, digital skills in Bulgaria, qualifications and progression indicators in the Netherlands, and supervisors' preparedness in Finland. Broader outcomes, including general self-efficacy, employee career outcomes and organisational mobility, changed less consistently. Finnish register data and Dutch programme records provided concrete progression information, but neither established causal effects; Bulgarian employment follow-up covered a minority of completers, while Portuguese follow-up was too limited for robust conclusions.

The realist evaluation explains why these results varied. Peer interaction supported normalisation, social support and vicarious learning; practice and visible progress created mastery; accessible delivery reduced participation friction; and content linked to personal aspirations or operational needs strengthened perceived value. These mechanisms mainly produced proximal changes. Their conversion into employment, retention or mobility required recognised qualifications, suitable vacancies, employer capacity, workplace support and time.

The Netherlands' jobseeker pathway illustrates the added value of combining evidence sources. Language and literacy barriers made the questionnaire unsuitable, so evaluation relied on diplomas, partial certificates and progression to work, training or work trials. The qualitative data showed that outcomes reflected not only candidate/jobseeker capability but also the fit between language requirements, programme level, placement conditions and

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workplace expectations. They also showed that the first trajectory prompted a catch-up route and redesign, developments that a single end-of-programme measurement would have missed.

For supervisors, small follow-up groups and heterogeneous working conditions limited the quantitative analyses. Interviews indicated that peer learning, role clarification and developmental feedback were more likely to work where supervisors had operational space, psychological safety and continuity in line management. In the Netherlands, supervisors reported increased awareness and preparedness, while the quantitative comparison showed no statistically significant differences. These sources are treated as complementary rather than as alternatives: the qualitative findings identify conditions and mechanisms but do not override the quantitative uncertainty.

Limited employee-level change was also consistent with the intervention logic in Finland and the Netherlands. Employees were indirect beneficiaries of supervisor training. Effects therefore depended on supervisors first changing their practices and employees subsequently experiencing sufficient developmental support. Staffing pressure, limited time and organisational instability weakened this pathway. In the Dutch case, retention also became more salient than mobility itself, suggesting that mobility measures captured only part of the intervention's intended organisational value.

Timing remains an important limitation. Several redesigned pathways, coalition agreements and continuation plans had not yet been implemented or observed at the final data collection. In Bulgaria, delays in realist data collection reduced the opportunity for evidence-informed adaptation during implementation. The evaluation therefore provides stronger evidence on proximal outcomes, mechanisms and implementation learning than on long-term employment, mobility or institutionalisation.

7.2 Impact of the coalition on individual-level interventions

Coalitions affected individual-level interventions in different ways. Across the Living Labs, collaboration generally started from existing relationships, while research and lead partners remained important drivers of implementation. Coalition added value was strongest where no single organisation controlled all resources required for an inclusive pathway.

In Bulgaria, the coalition supported an age-sensitive package combining digital, green and soft-skills training with psychological and career support, employer contact and awareness raising. Complementary expertise helped make participation accessible and relevant to people aged 50 and over. However, the coalition did not create a systematic link between training and internal employee mobility. Employer demand focused strongly on recognised technical qualifications and entry-level recruitment, while replacement costs and limited internal career structures constrained mobility.

In Finland, coalition involvement in intervention co-design was more limited, but collaboration between employment services and third-sector organisations enabled TAITE delivery and continuation. Stakeholders regarded the intervention as a shared activity that strengthened communication and trust. IPS also demonstrated the importance of employer-facing and financial support, although interrupted implementation meant that its intended mechanism could not be adequately tested. The supervisor intervention was developed

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through cooperation between FIOH and the City of Kokkola rather than through the wider coalition.

In Portugal, regional partnerships supported recruitment, training delivery and adaptation across Lisbon, Évora, Lagoa and the Digital Living Lab. Their contribution varied by setting and should not be interpreted as one uniformly functioning coalition. The available evidence most clearly supports the role of regional partners in access and implementation; broader claims about durable employer pathways or institutionalisation remain emerging.

The Netherlands' case most clearly demonstrates the coalition as implementation infrastructure. Outreach, income support, training, certification, placement and workplace guidance were held by different organisations. The coalition's distinctive role was to connect these components and manage the transitions between them: admission criteria, learning requirements, financial arrangements, placement conditions and continuing support. Its value therefore lay less in running separate activities than in improving fit across organisational boundaries.

The Netherlands' coalition also learned through implementation. The first trajectory made previously implicit assumptions visible and enabled partners to revise candidate criteria, the sequence of employer and education involvement, and the framework across placements. The coalition was therefore not fully formed before implementation; coalition development and intervention design proceeded iteratively. This learning can improve later designs, but the effects of the redesigned trajectories had not yet been observed.

Employer willingness and employer capacity were distinct conditions. Labour shortages made employers more open to new target groups, but also reduced the time and financial space for supervision. Intermediaries could absorb coordination and administrative work, but could not remove national requirements, finance workplace supervision or create suitable vacancies. Coalition effectiveness thus depended on both relational commitment and the practical capacity to follow through.

Finally, coalition processes remained vulnerable to staff turnover, organisational restructuring and changing national instruments. Trust and shared understanding accumulated in a small number of people; when key contacts changed, progress slowed. Continuity of coordination should therefore be treated as a condition for impact rather than an administrative detail.

7.3 The ENGINE approach

The ENGINE was conceived of as a systems approach in which regional coalitions align intervention packages across levels, employee development creates mobility, and mobility releases entry-level opportunities for prepared jobseekers.

7.3.1 Coalition building

Coalition building occurred in all Living Labs but differed in breadth, formality and operational involvement. Bulgaria established a broad cross-sector network, while day-to-day implementation depended on a smaller core group. Public institutions often provided

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legitimacy rather than operational capacity, and employers participated selectively. Centralised governance restricted the potential for regional policy change, so the coalition functioned mainly as a local network for delivery, connection and awareness raising.

Finland built on trusted bilateral relationships, but employer participation remained limited in a region dominated by micro-enterprises and weakening labour demand. Renewed workshops, clearer leadership and planned working groups aimed to move cooperation towards a more multilateral model, but parts of this formalisation were still emerging during the evaluation.

In the Netherlands, a relatively small operational coalition was sufficient to begin work because it included the organisations controlling essential pathway resources. Wider participation became more meaningful once there was a concrete activity to join. The coalition and the intervention developed in parallel while partners interpreted changing national instruments and translated them into regional arrangements. Coalition building should therefore be seen as an ongoing implementation process, not a preparatory stage completed before delivery.

In Portugal, recognition of employment and skills challenges supported regional partnerships, but the level of formalisation and employer involvement differed between settings. The evidence supports speaking of regional partnership structures rather than assuming one integrated national coalition. Across countries, the findings suggest that coalition quality depends more on access to essential resources, clear mandates and active contribution than on involving every potentially relevant stakeholder from the outset.

7.3.2 Multi-level intervention package

Individual-level interventions were the most fully implemented component of ENGINE. Bulgaria combined skills, personal support and employer contact; Finland implemented jobseeker coaching and supervisor development; the Netherlands connected a work-based entry pathway with supervisor training; and Portugal combined employability, management and digital-skills activities. Organisational and system-level change was less consistent.

The findings confirm that capability development and opportunity creation are separate causal stages. Skills, confidence and preparedness could improve without producing employment or mobility when recognised qualifications, suitable vacancies, employer capacity or workplace support were missing. Multi-level intervention is therefore valuable only when links between levels are explicit, feasible and resourced.

The vacancy-chain logic was not demonstrated. In Dutch childcare, entry-level vacancies already existed, so inflow did not depend on prior employee mobility. In Bulgaria, SMEs and state-aid constraints weakened the business case for linking upskilling to vacancy release. Finnish labour demand was weak and internal pathways were limited, while Portugal did not demonstrate a systematic connection between employee mobility and jobseeker inflow. In shortage sectors, employee development may contribute more plausibly to retention and workforce capacity than to a sequential vacancy chain.

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7.3.3 Co-design and co-implementation

Adaptive implementation was common, but comprehensive co-design was less evident. In Bulgaria, core partners, trainers, employers and HR actors adapted content and contributed to delivery, while the wider coalition participated more selectively. The model supported practical responsiveness, but evaluation feedback arrived too late to guide all implementation decisions.

In the Netherlands, co-design developed through successive cycles. Initial attention concerned pathway content and level; later reflection addressed partner roles, placement conditions and a shared framework. Much of the work involved adapting existing vocational routes and organisational practices rather than designing from nothing. This process increased organisational ownership, but the target group's perspective entered mainly through evaluation and partner accounts rather than through continuous direct participation.

Finland mainly selected and adapted evidence-based interventions through responsible service organisations, while Portugal varied across regional settings. Across Living Labs, co-design should therefore be reported precisely: who participated, which decisions were open, how feedback changed the intervention and whether participant experience entered directly or through intermediaries. Iteration also requires dedicated time and coordination capacity; attendance alone is not equivalent to meaningful co-creation.

7.3.4 Employer engagement

Employer engagement appears an extremely important aspect of the whole starting process of coalition building. In the present Living Labs, the coalitions started from existing relationships. In different CMO's employer engagement is addressed under several headings. In this paragraph, this information is summarized.

Employer engagement was uneven across the four Living Labs, and the evidence does not support one uniformly demonstrated engagement mechanism. The strongest cross-country finding concerns the limits of employer willingness. Employers could support the aim of labour-market inclusion while still being unable or reluctant to participate because engagement competed with existing programmes, required scarce organisational capacity, involved unclear costs or offered insufficiently visible operational value. Employer willingness and employer capacity should therefore be treated as separate conditions.

In Bulgaria, engagement was shaped by the relative attractiveness of the Synclusive offer. The Living Lab competed with established government programmes that provided longer training, recognised certification and financial incentives. Employers with sufficient internal capacity were often relatively self-sufficient, whereas smaller employers that might benefit from coalition support had fewer resources for sustained participation. The Bulgarian findings therefore provide stronger evidence on barriers to employer engagement than on successful mechanisms for changing employer behaviour. Target-group-specific forums and concrete examples of workers aged 50 and over may help challenge stereotypes, but the available

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evidence does not establish that these activities produced lasting changes in recruitment practices.

In Finland, stakeholders similarly emphasised the limited capacity of SMEs and micro-enterprises to participate directly. Employer-facing intermediaries, including entrepreneurs' associations and business-development organisations, were considered important for bringing employer conditions and needs into the coalition. Stakeholders expected tailored services, sector-specific approaches, a clear value proposition and active employer support to increase engagement. However, these relationships were mainly expressed as stakeholder assessments of what a well-functioning coalition would require. The employer-support mechanism embedded in IPS, in which active communication and continuing job-coach support were expected to reduce uncertainty about recruitment, could not be adequately tested because implementation was interrupted and employer outreach remained limited.

The Living Lab in the Netherlands provides the most detailed evidence concerning how employer engagement worked. Participation required employers to attend meetings, coordinate with several public organisations and complete administrative procedures. When a coalition partner absorbed part of this work, participation was perceived as more feasible, particularly for organisations without dedicated HR or administrative staff. The relevant mechanism was not an increase in goodwill, but a change in employers' assessment of whether participation was manageable within their limited time and attention. Repeated examples from comparable childcare organisations and employer involvement in pathway design also appeared to strengthen perceived feasibility, reciprocity and ownership. Nevertheless, the coalition could not remove nationally defined requirements, cover all workplace-supervision costs or eliminate its own dependence on temporary coordination funding.

In Portugal, employer participation was mainly linked to specific project activities. The available material suggests that employers engaged more readily when training or coalition activities offered direct and recognisable organisational value. Sectoral alignment may have strengthened this relevance, particularly where activities connected to regional economic priorities. However, the direct employer evidence was limited, and several claims about co-designed curricula, increased trust, mentorship pathways, job placements and institutionalised partnerships were not clearly distinguished from proposed future developments. These should therefore be formulated as refined hypotheses or implementation implications rather than as demonstrated outcomes.

Taken together, the findings suggest that employer engagement becomes more likely when four conditions converge: participation addresses a recognisable organisational need; the coordination and administrative burden is manageable; employers receive credible information and support that reduce uncertainty; and the collaboration offers reciprocal value or meaningful influence over implementation. The evidence for this explanatory pattern is strongest in the Dutch Living Lab. In Bulgaria, Finland and Portugal, the country reports more often identify barriers, stakeholder perceptions and promising design principles than demonstrated changes in employer behaviour.

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7.3.5 Lessons learned on the ENGINE approach

The original vacancy-chain assumption was too narrow for the contexts studied and was not realised in any Living Lab. This does not invalidate the broader systems perspective. The evaluation supports five lessons:

- Coalitions are most useful where inclusion requires resources held by different organisations and where coordination improves fit across organisational boundaries.
- A small operational core may be more effective initially than a broad but weakly engaged membership; wider partners can join around concrete activities.
- Capability gains require conversion conditions, including recognised routes, employer capacity, workplace support and real labour-market opportunities.
- Employee development may support retention, employability or professional growth even where it does not create a vacancy chain.
- Co-design and iterative learning need explicit resources, direct feedback and clarity about which actors influence which decisions.

The ENGINE should therefore be considered as a flexible multi-level framework with several possible pathways: direct jobseeker entry, employee development and retention, strengthened employer capacity, system alignment and, where conditions permit, a vacancy chain. Future applications should define the intended pathway and its assumptions in advance, and evaluate proximal outcomes, conversion conditions and distal outcomes separately.

7.4 Maintenance and sustainability of the coalitions

Sustainability differed across Living Labs and cannot be inferred from willingness to continue. It requires organisational ownership, explicit mandates, continuing coordination resources, stable participation and embedding in routine governance or financing. Several arrangements were still planned or emerging at the final data collection, so conclusions about institutionalisation remain cautious.

In Bulgaria, continuation depended strongly on the lead organisation, follow-up funding and the ability to maintain employer and institutional engagement in a centralised policy environment. The coalition demonstrated a workable implementation network, but evidence of structural embedding or policy influence was limited. In Portugal, sustainability likewise depended on whether regional coordination, training practices and partnerships could be anchored in existing institutions and innovation structures; project-based participation did not itself establish post-project continuation.

Finland benefited from existing trust and a long tradition of regional collaboration. Employment services assumed clearer leadership, thematic working groups began to develop and a coalition agreement was prepared. These developments support continuity, but their operation and effects still required observation, and reduced public resources remained a constraint.

The Dutch configurations emphasise the process of collaboration: creating a neutral setting, maintaining continuity of participants, making contributions and responsibilities explicit, using comparable examples and holding recurring conversations about how

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collaboration is functioning. The value of an agreement lies partly in the negotiation it prompts, rather than only in the signed document.

Sustainability also requires trust to move from individuals to organisations. Personal relationships enabled a rapid start but created vulnerability when key people left. Written mandates, board-level ownership and multi-year agendas reduce this dependence without replacing the personal trust needed for candid exchange. An accountability horizon measured in years can protect relational and developmental work from pressure for immediate output.

Continued participation must remain worthwhile in the resources partners lack. For employers, time, administrative capacity and supervision costs were often more binding than goodwill. Coalitions sustain engagement by absorbing coordination, keeping exchanges reciprocal and differentiating expectations according to organisational capacity. However, this coordinating function itself requires continued funding.

Coalitions of this kind are therefore better understood as regional implementation infrastructure than as temporary projects expected to become self-sustaining. What needs to endure is not every specific activity, but the capacity to coordinate, learn from implementation, redesign pathways and reconnect organisational resources as needs and policy conditions change.

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Overview of the Appendices:

Appendix 1: Living Lab Bulgaria — Attached

Appendix 2: Living Lab Finland — Attached

Appendix 3: Living Lab the Netherlands — Attached

Appendix 4: Living Lab Portugal — Attached

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SYNCLUSIVE

Funded by
the European Union

Living Lab Report

Sofia, Bulgaria

Appendix 1 to D2.1 Realist Evaluation



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1. Living Lab: Bulgaria

1.1 Building a Coalition

The Bulgarian Living Lab in Sofia (SofiaLab), implemented by the Sofia Development Association (SDA), has demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt the SYNCLUSIVE approach to the Bulgarian labour-market context. The Living Lab was designed around an active community coalition, bringing together public authorities, employers, civil-society organisations, social partners and other stakeholders. This collaborative model is central to the SYNCLUSIVE concept and is intended to create the conditions for sustainable labour-market inclusion beyond the individual interventions themselves.

Building a functioning coalition in a complex policy and employment environment required targeted outreach, persistence and flexible partnership-building. Bulgaria already has established public programmes supporting upskilling, reskilling and employment, including programmes offering certification and employer incentives. Rather than duplicating these mechanisms, SofiaLab positioned SYNCLUSIVE as a complementary, locally embedded approach, with particular added value in connecting stakeholders, strengthening employability, supporting mobility and testing an integrated package of interventions for people over 50.

SDA used several complementary entry points, drawing on existing relationships with public and private enterprises and engaging representatives of social partners and other intermediaries. From an early stage, SDA also included a licensed HR and training company to strengthen the pathway between skills development, employment and labour-market mobility. This flexible approach enabled the Living Lab to combine SDA's convening role with specialised expertise and employer networks.

SDA secured the participation of prominent businesses and continued to engage additional companies, including municipal enterprises, during implementation. The experience of coalition (re)building confirmed the value of sustained relationship development and of creating multiple entry points for employers and other stakeholders to contribute. It also enabled SofiaLab to progressively broaden the coalition and strengthen local ownership of the Living Lab.

At the time of the first activation event, the regional coalition consisted of the following organisations (ordered as they signed the Coalition Agreement):

- SDA
- Young Talents 50+
- ARC Fund
- Capital Municipal Agency for Privatisation
- Two NGOs dealing with social inclusion of vulnerable groups
- One business network
- Four private employers from the agrifood, automotive, building and IT sectors
- Two online media

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Subsequently, the coalition was further strengthened by:

- The Employment Agency
- Sofia Urban Mobility Centre
- Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria
- One private employer from the fast-moving consumer goods sector

The coalition operates through an open and collaborative management model, allowing each organisation to contribute according to its priorities, expertise and capacity. Its two-tier structure combines a core implementation group with a wider stakeholder community. The core coalition - SDA, Young Talents 50+ and ARC Fund - supports day-to-day planning, organisation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, while the broader coalition contributes through targeted activities such as career forums, training and engagement with representatives of the target group. This structure has enabled SofiaLab to combine continuity and operational capacity with broad stakeholder participation.

1.2 The target group

The Sofia Living Lab translated the overall SYNCLUSIVE objectives into a locally relevant and inclusive target-group approach. The initial focus was on women aged 55+, reflecting the evidence that women in this age group face particular barriers to labour-market participation, including gaps in digital skills and low participation in lifelong learning. Following dialogue with companies and public bodies, SDA broadened the operational target group to include both women and men over 50 who were looking for employment or considering upward or sideward mobility.

This adjustment reflected the Bulgarian regulatory and labour-market context and enabled SofiaLab to reach a larger pool of potential participants while maintaining a strong focus on the barriers experienced by women over 50. The broader approach also supported a more inclusive learning environment and allowed the Living Lab to address labour-market mobility as a shared challenge.

Precautions were taken throughout the interventions and coalition work to address potential discrimination based on gender. Both jobseekers and employees seeking upward or sideward mobility through upskilling were invited to participate. SDA managed an open recruitment process, with outreach continuing throughout implementation and gaining additional momentum following the first public activation event on 25 October 2024.

People who registered but did not participate in the SYNCLUSIVE interventions were also invited to contribute to monitoring and evaluation as a control group. This approach strengthened the evidence base of the Living Lab while maintaining a broad connection with the potential participant community.

1.3 From drivers & barriers to solutions

SofiaLab translated the identified labour-market barriers into a coordinated package of practical interventions designed to strengthen both employability and labour-market mobility. The 17-member coalition contributed to the implementation of interventions through skills development, career meetings and forums, psychological and career support, employer

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engagement, promotion of inclusive employment practices, and campaigns addressing age discrimination and stereotypes.

The approach reflects the core SYNCLUSIVE principle that labour-market inclusion is strengthened when support for jobseekers is combined with opportunities for current employees to develop and progress. In Sofia, this was translated into an integrated offer connecting training, confidence-building, career support, employer engagement and awareness raising. The Living Lab therefore provided not only individual support, but also a platform for strengthening the local ecosystem around inclusive employment.

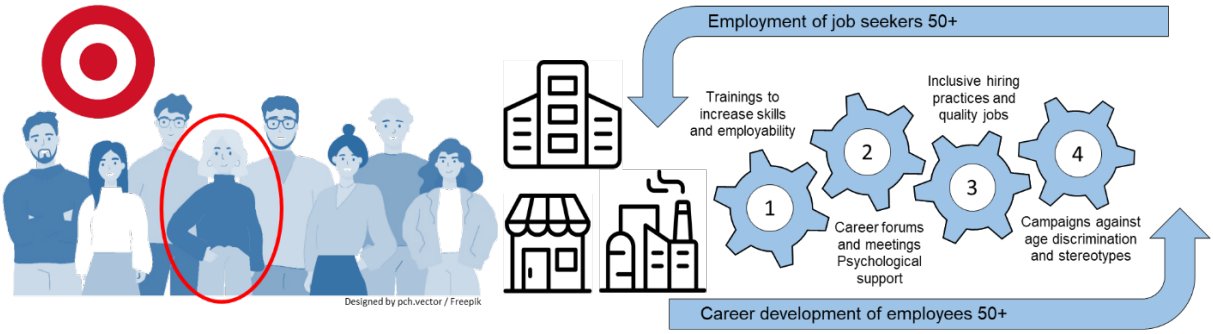

Figure 1: Implementation of ENGINE in SofiaLab

At the heart of the SofiaLab implementation was a free, needs-oriented training programme designed to strengthen the employability, confidence and adaptability of people over 50. The programme was informed by an assessment of the digital and green skills increasingly required by the labour market and was delivered through an online learning platform combined with in-person learning.

In line with the SYNCLUSIVE design, an online learning platform was developed, tested and put into practical use. The resulting hybrid format made participation more accessible and flexible: 30 hours of learning were distributed across three consecutive weeks, with participants able to switch between online and in-person participation for individual sessions. The courses addressed three complementary areas: digital skills, including digital security, content creation, social media for business communication, the use of AI for work and digital public services; green skills, including the basics of circular economy principles and workplace materials; and personal and soft skills, competencies and motivation, including self-assessment, adaptability and financial literacy.

Qualified trainers delivered the programme, while participants could also access individual and group consultations with a psychologist or career counsellor and practical job-search assistance, including CV and interview preparation and advice on starting a business. This combination of technical, personal and career-oriented support during a month-long training and post-training period gave the intervention a particularly strong practical orientation. An overview of the training courses and other services provided is presented in Table 1.

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The integrated offer allowed participants to select the combination of support most relevant to their needs and aspirations. Depending on their circumstances and the implementation phase in which they joined, jobseekers and employees could participate in one, two or all three training areas. This flexibility was a key strength of the Living Lab approach, allowing the intervention package to accommodate different starting points, career goals and learning needs.

The group-based training model deliberately brought together jobseekers and employees seeking sideward or upward mobility. Although participants entered with different levels of experience and skills, the course components were adapted to accommodate this diversity. The SofiaLab interventions were implemented from November 2024 to April 2026, providing a sustained period for testing, learning and refinement.

The experience also produced concrete examples of individual transformation. Two participants moved from job seeking into new roles—as a social worker and a project coordinator—after completing the programme. They reported that the training helped them build confidence, communicate their strengths more effectively, and approach job interviews with greater self-assurance. Their experiences illustrate how an integrated Living Lab intervention can translate skills development and community support into renewed professional opportunities.

Overall, SofiaLab has provided a strong real-life testing environment for the ENGINE approach in Bulgaria. Its combination of coalition-building, flexible participation, hybrid learning, personalised support, employer engagement and awareness raising has created a practical foundation for more inclusive labour-market pathways for people over 50. The experience is also valuable as a basis for learning, further adaptation and wider uptake of approaches that can support lifelong learning, career mobility and age-inclusive employment.

Table 1: Calendar of main intervention activities in SofiaLab

	Nov 24	Jan 25	Mar 25	Apr 25	Nov 25	Apr 26
Soft skills 1st edition						
Digital skills 1st edition						
Soft skills 2nd edition						
Green skills						
First Career Forum						
Digital skills 2nd edition						
Second Career Forum						

1.4 Methods

1.4.1 Recruitment of participants

The intervention participants, both jobseekers and employees, have been recruited primarily through training advertisements, distributed through social networks and coalition member organisations' own networks. The advertisements contained registration links hosted in SDA's website where the candidates were asked to fill in a short registration form with their contact

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details and employment status. The day prior to the start of the training SDA shared with ARC Fund the list of registered jobseekers and employees. In the same afternoon, ARC Fund sent personal email invitations for survey participation to all persons in the list, with links to the respective online questionnaire, according to the employment status they have declared.

The distribution of survey links was planned in three measurement points for each training course: T0 – before the start of the course; T1 – immediately after the end of the course (three weeks after the start); and T2 – at least four months after the end of the course.

However, some of the training participants registered directly in the paper attendance lists distributed in the beginning of the first training sessions. These lists did not contain information about the employment status and for those who registered directly at place and did not answer at least one survey wave, this circumstance created hardship in defining which group they belong to. In addition, many of them did not have the chance to answer T0 really before any training activities had taken place.

SDA dedicated ten minutes prior to the start of the first session and 10 minutes after the last session of each training for ARC Fund to explain their role as research partner in the SYNCLUSIVE initiative, the research activities envisaged, data protection and confidentiality measures, as well as the importance of the reiterative survey methodology for the overall assessment of initiative's effect and for potential future improvements. In these time slots, ARC Fund also informed participants about the option to fill in a paper questionnaire instead of the online link, with enough paper questionnaires available at the training premises. Due to precautious considerations to not repel people from training participation, the researchers have not been allowed to be present during the training, nor to talk to people personally at place to invite them for in-depth conversation.

After the end of the last session, researchers were able to photocopy the attendance lists. Participants who attended at least two of the three training sessions were considered as completed the training and belonging to the Treatment group. Those; those who attended one session were considered as dropped; and with no one session attended, they were considered as not started. Both dropped and not started formed the Control group. For collection of T1 data, personal email invitations were sent, with different text according to the completion status. All of those who registered, regardless if through the form at the SDA website or at place, received two survey links: with the questionnaire for jobseekers and the questionnaire for employees. Hereby, those who changed their employment status, as well as those whose status was unknown, were able to answer the questionnaire relevant for their actual status. People who dropped out or did not start the training received the same questionnaires, but in separate control group links. Along with survey links, both Treatment and Control groups were invited to attend a group discussion or an individual interview, online or at ARC Fund premises, upon their convenience. The same procedures repeated at least four months after the last session of each training, for collection of T2 data.

As rather few representatives answered of those who dropped or did not start for each training course, and the Control group was expected to be very small in numbers, ARC Fund put additional efforts to recruit respondents for the control group. Two invitations to the general population aged 50+ were circulated through the organisation's Facebook and LinkedIn

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accounts. Again, only few persons responded. To address this gap, ARC Fund assigned a research agency to recruit and administer self-completed paper questionnaires with jobseekers and employees aged 50+ in Sofia. The data collection was implemented to coincide with the T2 phase of the last training and within the frame of a national representative survey, that guaranteed random sampling of households.

Additionally, one month after T2 collection for the last training, ARC Fund distributed a short questionnaire to the Treatment group (all who completed the training with the exception of two persons who requested discontinuance of further communication), collecting information on the influence of interventions of their further career and training development. The training participants were asked the following questions (Table 2):

Table 2: Short questionnaire for the Treatment group – jobseekers and employees

1. Did you have a job before the training?	**2. Which of the following best describes your current situation?**	**3. Did the training help you in one or more of the following ways?**
a) Yes b) No	a) I moved to a better position in the same job b) I got new tasks, a new role or greater responsibilities in the same job c) I found a better job than the one I had before the training d) I started my own business or self-employed work e) I found a permanent job after the training f) I found a temporary job after the training g) I work part-time or occasionally h) I started a job training or a trial job i) I completed another training with a diploma or certificate j) I am still looking for a job k) Other, namely:	a) Helped me find a job b) Helped me get new tasks, a new role or greater responsibilities c) Helped me get a better position in the same job d) Improved my work skills e) Increased my confidence in doing the work expected of me f) Helped me in other ways, namely: g) Did not help me

For the Realist Evaluation on coalition level, trainers were invited for in-depth interviews at the beginning and at the end of the training sessions they delivered; while the coalition members received email invitations at each phase of coalition development (formation, sustainability and institutionalisation).

1.4.2 Attendance and participation

An overview of the participation of jobseekers and employees in the training courses is presented in (Table 3). The total number of unique individuals who started participating in the training courses was 36 for the jobseekers and 58 for the employees. Out of these, 33 jobseekers and 48 employees completed the training courses they started (92% and 83% completion rates, respectively). As some of the jobseekers and employees registered, completed and subsequently answered the questionnaires for more than one training course (e.g. on soft skills and on digital skills), the cumulative numbers of registrations/completions/research participations are higher than the numbers of persons registered/completed/participated in research. Out of 101 training completions, 40 were of people with initial status of jobseekers, and 61 of people with initial status of employees. This data means that 21% of the jobseeker participants and 27% of employee participants (or a

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quarter of all) have completed both soft skills and digital skills training, e.g. the core intervention activities.

Regarding participation in research, 27 of the jobseekers and 36 of the employees who completed training courses (Treatment group) responded at least once to the quantitative questionnaires, with 82% and 75% participation rates for jobseekers and employees respectively (Table 3). However, only 17 jobseekers (52%) and 14 employees (29%) responded at least at two measurement points, while 5 jobseekers (15%) and 6 employees (13%) responded in all three survey waves (T0, T1 and T2). Subsequently, 9 jobseekers and 16 employees responded to the short questionnaire; and some information about 4 jobseekers and 9 employees was indirectly gathered through comparison of their answers to the main questionnaires across different training courses and survey waves.

Of those who registered for a training but dropped or did not start (Control group), only 6 jobseekers and 20 employees responded (Table 3), but no one responded at more than one measurement point. In addition, one jobseeker and two employees for the Control group have been recruited through social network advertisement; and 35 jobseekers and 15 employees have been recruited within the frame of a national representative survey. Hereby, the total numbers of the Control group amounted to 42 for the jobseekers and 37 for the employees.

Table 3: Intervention participants

	Number of recruitments / people recruited for a training	**Number of starts/ people who started a training**	**Number of drop-outs/ people who dropped out of a training**	**Number of completions / people who completed a training**	**Number of participants/ people participated in research (Treatment group)**	**Number of participants/ people participated in research (Control group)**
Jobseekers	**71/60**	**43/36**	**3/3**	**40/33**	**33/27**	**6**
Employees	**122/105**	**71/58**	**10/10**	**61/48**	**44/36**	**20**

*The employment status is assigned according to the registration data provided by the participants, or if missing, according to the first survey phase they answered. As some people registered for or underwent only one, and others – two interventions (e.g. one soft-skill and one digital-skill training), the **black** figures represent total number of registrations/ starts/ drop-outs/ completions, and the **blue** figures represent the unique persons that registered/ started/ dropped/ completed, etc. The last column represents only those who registered for a training but dropped-out or did not start.

1.4.3 Methods of analysis

The survey data collected during the intervention was used to conduct the quantitative analysis using a combination of empirical methods, which were determined by the data structure and availability. The outcomes were first analysed on within-group level, only for the Treatment group (TG) across the T0, T1 and T2 measurement points. This approach was chosen due to the lack of a comparable Control group (CG) data collected in time periods, that directly correspond to the time periods in the TG. This is a central limitation to conducting a Treatment-Control group impact evaluation, using all the available time intervals. The CG which is currently presented in the tables below, was mainly collected during the final stages of the intervention period and to some extend overlaps with T2 of the TG. This has motivated our decision to conduct a Treatment-Control comparison only at T2.

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For each of the groups of jobseekers and employees, we have analysed the within-group dynamics across the available periods, **while the measures were calculated only if a minimum sample size rule of n > 10 was satisfied**. For the jobseekers, we have compared the baseline T0 with T1 only, since T2 did not satisfy the sample size rule, which is needed to ensure a minimal statistical validity. We used a **paired-samples t-test on the mean difference** to compare the two time points, while also calculating the Cohen's D for the size of the effect. For the employees, we have used the same empirical strategy for comparing T0 and T1 as well as T0 and T2, since for this group the final period T2 has a sufficient sample size. For our analysis, we would have ideally used a repeated measures ANOVA. However, this method would have required each respondent to have answered at every time point, which is rarely the case in our data set. Therefore, a repeated-measures ANOVA substantially reduces the sample size, which undermines the validity of the test.

Apart from the within-group analysis, we have also conducted a Treatment - Control comparison at T2 across the outcomes of interest. In this scenario, we have used a Welch t-test on the mean difference between the TG and CG, since those are independent samples. This analysis was conducted only for the employees, since the TG at T2 for the jobseekers had only 9 observations and did not satisfy the minimum sample size rule.

1.5 Quantitative results in SofiaLab

1.5.1 Characteristics of study participants

The baseline characteristics (at T0) of the TG and CG of jobseekers and employees are presented in Table 4. The average age of the TG of jobseekers and TG of employees was 58 and 59 years respectively, while the most of the participants were women (by 89%). Two of three TG jobseekers (67.9%) and four of five TG employees (84.6%) had at least tertiary education. In the CG of jobseekers prevail people with intermediate levels of education (52.5%). The educational levels of the CG of employees is approximately the same of the TG; however, it is a bit younger (with average age of 54) and the predominance of women is less significant (76%).

Table 4: Baseline socio-demographic characteristics for jobseekers and employees

	Jobseekers (N=28) at T0	**Jobseekers – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=42)**	**Employees (N=38) at T0**	**Employees – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=37)**
Population characteristics	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)
Age	58 (6.4)	58 (4.8)	59 (6.7599)	54 (5.6)
Gender (% women)	89% women	83% women	89% women	76% women
Level of education				
Basic education (secondary or lower)	0%	2.5%	0%	0%
Intermediate education (upper secondary education, post-secondary non-tertiary education)	32.1%	52.5%	15.4%	16.2%
Higher education (short cycle, tertiary or higher)	67.9%	45.0%	84.6%	83.8%

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The employees showed a 10+ years of engagement with their last employer on average, with about 3 years longer period for the TG (nearly 14 years, compared to 11 years for the CG). Among the jobseekers, the average period of unemployment for the TG lasted about half year longer than for CG (2.286 compared to 1.714, respectively).

Table 5: Baseline employment-related characteristics for jobseekers and employees

	Jobseekers (N=28) at T0	**Jobseekers – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=42)**	**Employees (N=38) at T0**	**Employees – control group – T0+T1+T2 (N=37)**
Population characteristics	Means (SD)	Means (SD)	Means (SD)	Means (SD)
Obstacles jobseekers:			Not applicable	Not applicable
Lack of job opportunities	3.792 (1.215)	3.132 (1.455)		
Commuting difficulties, e.g. difficult transport connections, long distances	3.37 (1.471)	2.857 (1.523)		
Lack of training and skills, e.g. language skills, lack of or outdated professional qualifications	3.778 (1.528)	2.951 (1.612)		
Diminished work motivation or desire to work	4.481 (0.849)	2.659 (1.543)		
Problems connected to health or functional capacity	3.741 (1.678)	2.537 (1.502)		
Personal life situation, e.g. family, relatives, friends (caregiving, childcare)	4.037 (1.16)	2.525 (1.664)		
Obstacles employees:	Not applicable	Not applicable		
Lack of training and skills, e.g. language skills, lack of professional qualifications or outdated qualifications			2.421(1.368)	2.27 (1.484)
Little motivation to work on my career			1.806 (1.142)	1.784 (1.205)
Problems connected to health			1.676 (1.036)	1.649 (1.086)
Personal life situation, e.g. family, relatives, friends (caregiving, childcare)			1.868 (1.07)	1.622 (0.982)
Lack of a good network of people who can help me with my career			2.444 (1.34)	2.081 (1.382)
Lack of financial resources			2.297 (1.151)	2.543 (1.502)
Barriers in my organisation or company			2.457 (1.146)	1.882 (1.225)
Years of employment with the current employer	Not applicable	Not applicable	13.964 (11.445)	10.767 (9.676)
Years of unemployment	2.286 (1.997)	1.714 (1.013)	Not applicable	Not applicable
Mental Health	0.215 (0.165)	0.348 (0.242)	0.227 (0.214)	0.214 (0.177)
Work Ability	7.926 (1.615)	7.45 (2.062)	7.703 (1.664)	8.5 (1.404)

In terms of the obstacles facing TG of jobseekers at baseline (Table 5), respondents indicated that on average, they are most affected by a diminished desire to work, followed by issues related to their personal life. Overall, TG of jobseekers were more likely to indicate being affected by certain obstacles, compared both to TG of employees and CG of jobseekers. For example, on a 1-5 scale, where 1 indicates “not difficult at all” and 5 indicates “extremely difficult,” the TG of jobseekers reported mean responses ranging from 3.37 to 4.481 across the different categories of obstacles (compared to a mean range of 2.525 to 3.132 for the CG of jobseekers and 1.676 to 2.457 for the TG of employees). In other words, the TG of

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jobseekers generally perceive career-related obstacles as ranging from “somewhat difficult” to “extremely difficult,” whereas the CG of jobseekers perceive them as “slightly difficult” to “somewhat difficult,” and the TG of employees tend to perceive them as “not difficult” or only “slightly difficult.” Simultaneously, among the employees, the perceptions of career obstacles do not differ substantially between the TG and the CG, with the exception of barriers in respondents’ organisations. While CG felt these barriers “not difficult” to “slightly difficult”, TG tended to estimate them as “slightly difficult” to “somewhat difficult”.

In contradiction to their perceived diminished desire to work, the TG of jobseekers reported at least as better work ability as the TG of employees and the CG of jobseekers – 7.93 in a scale from 0 to 10, compared to 7.70 for the TG of employees and 7.45 for the CG of jobseekers. On the contrary, the work ability reported by the CG of employees is higher (8.5) than those of the TG of employees, which might be related to the fact that the CG is about 5 years younger than the TG.

The same trends can be observed regarding the mental health issues reported by the respondents. In a 0-1 scale where the lower values show less frequent and the higher values show more frequent mental health issues, the mean value representing the frequency of mental health issues experiences by the TG of jobseekers (0.215) is slightly lower than those for the TG of employees (0.227) and significantly lower than those for the CG of jobseekers (0.348).

1.5.2 Results for jobseekers

The share of jobseekers that completed the training courses and found employment after the intervention was at least 24%, while at least 12% entered a training or received some form of a professional certificate (Table 6). However, this data cannot be treated as fully reliable, as less than 40% of the jobseekers who have completed a training in SofiaLab responded to the short questionnaire or to enough measurement points, in order to trace the changes in their career lives.

Table 6: Results for jobseekers: number of jobseekers who found employment after the interventions (N=13) at T2 or later

Employment status	N in follow-up	Percentage - follow-up	Percentage of all who completed
Not employed	5	38%	15%
Found employment	8	62%	24%
Permanent contract	1	8%	3%
Fixed-term contract	2	15%	6%
Other	3	23%	9%
No contract	2	15%	6%
Entered training or work trial	2	15%	6%
Received certificate/diploma/sub-diploma	2	15%	6%

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Furthermore, there is no proof that all cases of job finding can be associated with the interventions. Out of 5 jobseekers who answered the short questionnaire and reported to have found a job after T2, only two declared that it was due to the interventions they underwent (Table 7). Four of those five persons found temporary, part-time or freelance jobs, that might appear unstable over time. According to the opinion of the jobseekers – respondents of the short questionnaire, the intervention effects mostly led to improved skills and self-confidence.

Table 7: Results for jobseekers: self-reported intervention effect (N=9) after T2

Employment status	**N in follow-up**	**Percentage - follow-up**	**Percentage of all who completed**
Helped me find a job	2	22%	6%
Improved my work skills	5	56%	15%
Increased my confidence in doing the work expected of me	3	33%	9%
Did not help me	2	22%	6%

In terms of the primary outcomes, **there are no significant changes in the self-assessment of skills, self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy of the jobseekers** who participated in a training and assessed their skills at T1 (Table 8). The size of the effect is the largest for the job search self-efficacy (Cohen's D = 0.48), which is also the only case in the outcomes for jobseekers, where the statistical significance is at the 10% confidence level. This shows some indication that the intervention had a positive effect on the participant's skills in job searching. Furthermore, the time lapse between T0 and T1 in SofiaLab was about three weeks – a period that was probably insufficient to accumulate evidence for improved knowledge and skills.

Table 8: Primary outcomes for jobseekers: results on skills and self-efficacy

Outcome	**T0 N, Mean (SD)**	**T1 N, Mean (SD)**	**T2 N, Mean (SD)**	**N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)**	**Effect Size (Cohen's D / N^2)**	***P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0)**
Skills (0-1 scale)	27, 0.573 (0.143)	21, 0.643 (0.176)	9, 0.571 (0.091)	15, 0.044	0.274	0.307
Self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	28, 0.768 (0.133)	21, 0.772 (0.153)	9, 0.743 (0.128)	16, 0.016	0.178	0.488
Job search self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	27, 0.583 (0.22)	21, 0.645 (0.195)	9, 0.711 (0.15)	15, 0.057	0.481	0.084†

†The result is statistically significant at the 10% confidence level (p<0.10)

The secondary outcomes for jobseekers (motivation career identity, job seeking activity, job search attitude and mental health) do not show any significant results as well (Table 9). **Therefore, we cannot confirm that the effect of the intervention on both the primary and secondary outcomes is different from zero**. Again, the above considerations regarding scarcity of data and proximity of measurement points are valid.

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Table 9: Secondary outcomes for jobseekers

Outcome	T0 N, Mean (SD)	T1 N, Mean (SD)	T2 N, Mean (SD)	N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)	Effect Size (Cohen's D / N^2)	*P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0)
Motivation/ career identity	27,0.81 (0.142)	21, 0.848 (0.123)	9, 0.778 (0.19)	15, -0.004	-0.027	0.919
Job seeking activity	26, 1.5 (1.296)	21, 2.143 (1.957)	7, 1.143 (1.864)	16, 0.344	0.177	0.489
Job search attitude	27, 0.535 (0.121)	21, 0.515 (0.137)	9, 0.5 (0.136)	16, -0.059	-0.404	0.127
Mental health	27, 0.215 (0.165)	21, 0.302 (0.206)	9, 0.231 (0.167)	16, 0.055	0.297	0.254

1.5.3 Results for employees

The shares of employees who took on new roles and tasks and of those who participated in some form of career development activities after the end of the intervention, was at least by 13% of all who completed the training courses (Table 10). A larger share of at least 21% moved either upward or sideward to another career function. In the half of the cases, they moved to a new company or organisation. Although data is available for greater share of training graduates than in the case of jobseekers (52% compared to 39%), information is missing for almost half of the TG.

Similarly to the jobseekers, only four of ten employees who answered the short questionnaire and reported upward or sideward mobility, associated it with the intervention (Table 11). Again, improved skills and self-confidence are seen as the more prominent benefits of the intervention.

Table 10: Results for employees: number of employees that took on new tasks, roles, responsibilities or moved to another function (N=25) at T2 or later

Career development	N in follow-up	Percentage – follow-up	Percentage of all who completed
Took on new tasks, roles, responsibilities	6	24%	13%
Moved to another function (upward/sideward)	10	40%	21%
Participated in development activities last 6 months	6	24%	13%

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Table 11: Results for employees: self-reported intervention effect (N=16) after T2

Employment status	N in follow-up	Percentage - follow-up	Percentage of all who completed
Helped me find a new job	2	13%	4%
Helped me get new tasks, a new role or greater responsibilities	2	13%	4%
Helped me get a better position in the same job	0	0%	0%
Improved my work skills	10	63%	21%
Increased my confidence in doing the work expected of me	4	25%	8%
Helped me in other ways, namely: I do my job more effectively	2	13%	4%
Did not help me	1	6%	2%

In terms of the primary outcomes, there are no significant changes in the self-efficacy and job progression self-efficacy of the employees who participated in the training courses (Table 12). The effects are not significant for the paired-samples t-test both for T0-T1 and T0-T2 time periods.

Table 12: Primary outcomes for employees: results on self-efficacy

Outcome	T0 N, Mean (SD)	T1 N, Mean (SD)	T2 N, Mean (SD)	N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)	N of complete pairs, mean difference T2-T0 (only for complete pairs)	Effect Size (Cohen's D / N^2) for T1 – T0.	Effect Size (Cohen's D / N^2) for T2 – T0	*P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0)	*P-value* (paired sample t-test between T2 and T0)
Self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	37, 0.788 (0.148)	24, 0.79 (0.106)	15, 0.804 (0.132)	16, 0.019	11, 0.048	0.194	0.403	0.449	0.211
Job progression self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	37, 0.687 (0.159)	24, 0.625 (0.182)	15, 0.725 (0.186)	16, -0.039	11, 0.057	-0.202	0.386	0.432	0.229

For the secondary outcomes, there are positive results in the career planning and the work ability of the employees (in the T0-T2 comparison), which are significant at the 10% confidence level (Table 13). Once again, this shows some preliminary evidence about, which outcomes the intervention might have positive effect on. It is important to note that the significance at the 10% confidence level drops in the T0-T1 comparison for the same variables. This can be

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partially attributed to the larger samples size of the T0-T1 pair. In summary, we cannot confirm that the effect of the intervention on both the primary and secondary outcomes is different from zero.

Table 13: Secondary outcomes for employees

Outcome	**T0 N, Mean (SD)**	**T1 N, Mean (SD)**	**T2 N, Mean (SD)**	**N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)**	**N of complete pairs, mean difference T2-T0 (only for complete pairs)**	**Effect Size (Cohen' s D / N^2) for T1 – T0.**	**Effect Size (Cohen' s D / N^2) for T2 – T0**	***P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0)**	***P-value* (paired sample t-test between T2 and T0)**
Organizational mobility	36, 0.595 (0.286)	23, 0.537 (0.203)	15, 0.563 (0.271)	14, 0.083	11, -0.029	0.349	-0.139	0.214	0.654
Career-planning	38, 0.702 (0.196)	24, 0.663 (0.197)	15, 0.767 (0.219)	16, 0.042	11, 0.121	0.192	0.59	0.455	0.079†
Job satisfaction	38, 0.632 (0.293)	24, 0.615 (0.244)	15, 0.65 (0.305)	16, 0.036	11, 0.053	0.141	0.16	0.582	0.608
Work ability	37, 7.703 (1.664)	23, 7.913 (1.59)	15, 9 (0.845)	16, 0.188	11, 0.818	0.179	0.556	0.485	0.095†
Mental health	37, 0.227 (0.214)	22, 0.176 (0.161)	15, 0.206 (0.124)	16, -0.039	11, 0.818	-0.399	0.089	0.132	0.775

1.5.4 Measuring the effect using the control groups

For this analysis we have used a Welch t-test on the mean difference between the TG and CG only at T2 and only for the employees, due to the scarcity of data for jobseekers. Based on the p-values presented in Table 14, **there are no significant differences between the TG and CG** in terms of the key outcomes of interest for the employees. Therefore, we **do not find statistical evidence that employees who participated in the training courses are more likely to** have positive outcomes across the used metrics. In four of the variables, we see that the average performance of the TG is lower than the control. The self-efficacy variable, has particularly large negative effect size with a Cohen's D = -0.599. In this case, as the results for the TG of employees did not worsen between T0 and T2, the negative values suggest higher vulnerability of employees attracted to (experienced need of) the training. This vulnerability might be connected with their lower work ability, older age (table 14) or/and other factors. Further empirical investigation with a larger data set should explore the validity of this result. Overall, the absence of S-S results indicates that the current programme effects are not statistically different from zero.

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Table 14: Comparison between treatment and control groups in T2

Outcome	Treatment group (T2) N, Mean (SD)	Control group (T2) N, Mean (SD)	Treatment - Control-group mean difference (for T2)	Effect Size (Cohen's D / N^2)	P-value (Welch t-test between T2-Treatment and T2-Control)
Jobseekers:					
Self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	9, 0.743 (0.128)	37, 0.766 (0.217)	*Not enough data (N<10) in T2 Treatment to compute the t-test*		
Job search self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	9, 0.711 (0.15)	37, 0.57 (0.265)			
Motivation/ career identity	9, 0.778 (0.19)	37, 0.657 (0.234)			
Job seeking activity	7, 1.143 (1.864)	36, 2.528 (2.145)			
Job search attitude	9, 0.5 (0.136)	36, 0.512 (0.111)			
Mental health	9, 0.231 (0.167)	36, 0.336 (0.244)			
Employees:					
Self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	15, 0.804 (0.132)	18, 0.887 (0.11)	-0.083	-0.599	0.104
Job progression self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	15, 0.725 (0.186)	18, 0.766 (0.189)	-0.041	-0.220	0.534
Organizational mobility	15, 0.563 (0.271)	18, 0.631 (0.287)	-0.068	-0.245	0.487
Career-planning	15, 0.767 (0.219)	18, 0.713 (0.251)	0.054	0.227	0.516
Job satisfaction	15, 0.65 (0.305)	18, 0.752 (0.205)	-0.102	-0.401	0.280
Work ability	15, 9 (0.845)	18, 8.778 (1.166)	0.222	0.215	0.531
Mental health	15, 0.206 (0.124)	18, 0.162 (0.131)	0.044	0.340	0.336

1.5.5 Specific outcomes for SofiaLab

In addition to the indicators comparable to the other living labs, participants in the SofiaLab interventions were asked to rate their skills on the key topics included in the training courses they registered for, as a supplement to the main quantitative questionnaire. The control group questionnaire included topics for both main types of training (Table 15). In order to make the results comparable with the main indicators, the 5-point scale was recalculated to a scale from 0 to 1. The groups of jobseekers and employee participants were combined into one group, since they underwent the same training courses in mixed groups, and to overcome the issue of insufficient data in the T2 phase.

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Table 15: SofiaLab training topics

Scale	Personal/soft skills	Digital skills
1. None 2. Average 3. Good 4. Very good 5. Excellent ↓ 0 (None) – 1 (Excellent)	a) Analysis of your strengths and weaknesses, development of a personal portfolio and presentation at a job interview b) Time management and balance between personal and professional life c) Change management d) Entrepreneurship skills e) Motivation, leadership skills and teamwork f) Financial literacy and management of personal finances g) Asserting personal rights at work	a) Creating digital content and using social media for business communication b) Using artificial intelligence at work c) Cybersecurity (protection of personal data, protection of digital devices, use of basic digital public services, etc.)

With this approach, comparison between T2 and T0 phase is possible only for participants in digital skills training, and comparison between T1 and T0 is possible for both types of training. The statistical analysis provides statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$) showing the interventions increased participants' confidence in their personal and digital skills. Based on the Cohen's D coefficients, the magnitude of the positive effect is larger for the digital skills. (Table 16).

Table 16: Specific outcomes for the Treatment group

Outcome	**T0 N, Mean (SD)**	**T1 N, Mean (SD)**	**T2 N, Mean (SD)**	**N of complete pairs, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)**	**N of complete pairs, mean difference T2-T0 (only for complete pairs)**	**Effect Size (Cohen' s D / N^2) for T1 – T0.**	**Effect Size (Cohen' s D / N^2) for T0 – T2.**	***P-value* (paired sample t-test between T1 and T0)**	***P-value* (paired sample t-test between T2 and T0)**
Personal skills (0-1 scale)	30, 0.577 (0.188)	23, 0.582 (0.19)	13, 0.581 (0.15)	17, 0.08	9, 0.46	0.613	NA	0.023*	NA
Digital skills (0-1 scale)	36, 0.225 (0.202)	23, 0.409 (0.196)	11, 0.576 (0.206)	15, 0.17	11, 0.23	1.239	1.015	0.000***	0.007**

*The result is statistically significant at the 5% confidence level ($p<0.05$)
**The result is statistically significant at the 1% confidence level ($p<0.01$)
***The result is statistically significant at the 0.1% confidence level ($p<0.001$)

Self-assessment values for intervention-related skills have been as well compared between TG and CG at T2 (Table 17). Again, the data provides solid base to state significant results in favour of TG, with significantly more prominent advantage regarding digital skills.

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Table 17: Specific outcomes: comparison between Treatment and Control group in T2

Outcome	Treatment group (T2) N, Mean (SD)	Control group (T2) N, Mean (SD)	Treatment - Control group mean difference (for T2)	Effect Size (Cohen's D / N^2)	P-value (Welch t-test between T2-Treatment and T2-Control)
Personal skills (0-1 scale)	13, 0.581 (0.15)	55, 0.506 (0.24)	0.075	0.330	0.189
Digital skills (0-1 scale)	11, 0.576 (0.206)	55, 0.218 (0.267)	0.358	1.383	0.000***

***The result is statistically significant at the 0.1% confidence level (p<0.001)

1.5.6 Answering the research questions using quantitative analyses

1) **Jobseekers:** To what extent do jobseekers experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, as a result of the intervention or intervention package?

The findings provide no statistically significant evidence that the intervention improved jobseekers' self-assessed skills, self-efficacy, job search self-efficacy, or other IMBP-related outcomes. Although job search self-efficacy showed the largest effect size (Cohen's D = 0.48) and reached significance at the 10% confidence level, the result is based on a very small sample and should be interpreted cautiously. Similarly, no statistically significant changes were observed in secondary outcomes, including motivation, career identity, job-seeking activity, job-search attitude, and mental health. Therefore, the study cannot confirm that the intervention had a measurable effect on either primary or secondary outcomes for jobseekers. It should be emphasized that in 2025, Bulgaria was preparing for the adoption of euro. Along with political opposition in the country that was additionally aggravated over this process, the anticipated economic insecurity was disproportionally felt by vulnerable groups, including by the target group of SofiaLab. The resulting increased anxiety levels might have neutralised the potential positive intervention effects on participants' mental health.

Regarding living lab-specific outcomes, the scarcity of data in T2, amplified by the additional division of participants in soft-skills and digital-skills trainees, does not allow separate conclusions for jobseekers and employees. However, the analysis for the target group as a whole, proofs tangible intervention effect on LL-specific skills, and particularly digital competences.

2) **Employees:** To what extent do employees experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, following participation in the intervention or intervention package?

The results indicate no statistically significant changes in employees' self-efficacy or job progression self-efficacy following participation in the intervention. Some positive results were observed for secondary outcomes, specifically career planning and work ability, in the longer-term comparison (T0-T2), where changes were significant at the 10% confidence level. However, these effects were not consistently significant across measurement periods.

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Comparison between the Treatment group and the Control group also revealed no statistically significant differences in key outcomes. As a result, the study cannot conclude that the intervention produced measurable improvements in employees' primary or secondary outcomes.

For living lab-specific outcomes, as well as for the mental health results, the above considerations regarding jobseekers are valid for the employees as well.

3) **Mobility effects:** To what extent does the intervention package lead to changes in jobseekers' employment status and in employee mobility within organisations, such as increased employment transitions or shifts in tasks and responsibilities?

Some positive outcomes are suggested by the facts that at least 24% of the participating jobseekers found employment after the intervention, and at least 12% entered additional training or obtained a professional certificate. Among employees, 13% assumed new roles or responsibilities, and 21% experienced upward or lateral career moves, either within their organization or through transitions to another employer. However, due to substantial missing data and low response rates, particularly among jobseekers, the reliability of these estimates is limited. Mobility data is available for less than 40% of jobseeker and about a half of employee training participants. Consequently, while the descriptive results suggest potential positive employment and career mobility effects, the study does not provide robust statistical evidence that the intervention package caused these changes. In less than half of the reported mobility cases, the participants associated them with the intervention. Skills and self-confidence improvements are pointed instead as self-reported intervention results.

1.6 Realist Evaluation results – coalition level

The Realist Evaluation analysis of SofiaLab is based on qualitative data collected through 34 in-depth interviews and one online focus group discussion conducted between July 2024 and March 2026. This period can be conditionally divided in two phases: a theory developing phase, which lasted approximately until March 2025, and theory refinement and testing phase, which spanned the period between April 2025 and March 2026.

Coalition-level information feeding Realist Evaluation analysis was obtained from one group discussion, six interviews with coalition members and two interviews with trainers, that is, professionals who delivered the training courses. The conducted interviews with trainers were totally six. They provided rich and valuable information at the individual level and were therefore considered in this part of the analysis. The individual level analysis additionally includes information from in-depth interviews with jobseekers and employees who completed the training courses (Treatment group), as well as jobseekers and employees who registered for the courses but did not start or complete them (Control group). The precise number of Realist Evaluation data sources disaggregated by type of respondent, theory development and level of analysis is presented in Table 18.

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Table 18: Overview of qualitative data collected in SofiaLab

	Phase 1: theory developing	**Phase 2: theory refinement / testing**
Individual level		
Interviews with jobseekers	0 Treatment group; 0 Control group	7 Treatment group; 2 Control group
Interviews with employees	0 Treatment group; 0 Control group	10 Treatment group; 3 Control group
Interviews with trainers	5	1
Coalition level		
Interviews with coalition members	3	3
Interviews with trainers*	2	0
Focus group (number of participants)	0	1 (8)

* The total number of interviews with trainers is 6. Two of the interviews are used both at individual and coalition level.

1.6.1 Coalition-level general and context information

The identified factors enabling and hindering the activity of the local coalition in SofiaLab can be summarized in seven major groups.

Governance structure

High governance *centralisation* was identified as a defining structural constraint for the Bulgarian Living Lab. Bulgaria operates a nationally governed employment system, and local offices are limited to the territorial delivery of centrally designed programmes. This significantly restricts what a city-level coalition can realistically achieve in terms of influencing employment policy. According to the coalition leader, the only meaningful pathway to policy influence would require alignment between local and national governing parties, which was not the case when the SYNCLUSIVE interventions were designed and implemented. Furthermore, from the beginning of 2017 to the middle of 2026, Bulgaria went through five early parliamentary elections and had eight caretaker national governments. The *political instability and polarisation* in the country made the majority of stakeholders unwilling to participate in initiatives involving political figures, such as the city mayor. In response, the coalition focused its efforts on more locally achievable outcomes, such as awareness-raising, visibility events, success stories, and networking, rather than pursuing structural policy change.

Social policies

The existing national employment programmes in Bulgaria offer state-recognised certifications for participants completing training activities organised through the Employment Office and provide comparatively attractive incentives for employers through subsidised employment schemes targeting different categories of unemployed individuals. While these instruments strengthen employability and facilitate labour market entry by combining skills development with financial support for employers, from the perspective of NGO-driven small-scale initiative

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like Synclusive, they appeared rather as a hindering factor for creation and establishment of a strong local coalition, as they leave little room to demonstrate and prove an added value: "But then again, I mean, what exactly do you offer to the process, because in the meantime, you have to compete with the instruments that are offered by the state, the difference being that the state is offering much longer time that they offer, they work with companies or they provide certification, and so on." *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*

On the contrary, gaps in labour policy were seen as opportunities for the coalition in SofiaLab to test ways of addressing them.

The first labour policy gap identified as an opportunity was the *greater focus on younger rather than older unemployed people*. In addition, existing national policies targeting women aged 50+ were perceived as being more oriented towards providing early retirement options than supporting their continued participation in and adaptation to the labour market (*interview with coalition members, formation phase*). The selection of people aged 50+, with a particular focus on women as a target group opened a niche for the SYNCLUSIVE coalition, where the need for knowledge and promising practices is clearly recognised.

Subsequent gap-opportunity ambivalence was found in the *underutilisation* of the target group's skills. Many jobseekers aged 50+ already possess solid qualifications (e.g., in economics or law), yet low self-confidence, rather than lack of skills, remains a major barrier to finding suitable employment. Older workers are often concentrated in low-skilled jobs despite having higher education and substantial expertise, leading to underutilised skills and further erosion of self-confidence *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

As another gap, it was further noted that people 50+ in Bulgaria have a great need to increase and update their digital skills *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. The national employment agency offers free training programmes for unemployed persons across a range of occupational profiles and age groups. However, according to coalition members, these programmes are *narrowly focused on skills development* and *disconnected from community-building and personal development support.* What was identified as missing from the existing policy offer was a space for personal skills development, psychological support, and informal contact with employers free from the pressure of formal interviews *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. These findings directly informed the intervention design, in which digital skills and soft skills training courses, along with meetings with employers, became core components.

While some opportunities are provided through the Employment Agency, they were considered insufficient to cover the entire target group *(group discussion with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. As a general observation, it was noted that policies for people aged 50+ require stronger design, implementation, and more consistent commitment from responsible institutions. *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. Two promising EU-level training-related policies were identified: Individual Training Accounts (still in the process of being introduced in Bulgaria), which enable people to accumulate funds and time for lifelong training from their first job; and Micro-credentials, which offer short, flexible skill development to address labour market insecurity and demotivation linked to uncertain income prospects. However, as limited policy awareness has been identified as a long-standing shortcoming of

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policy implementation in Bulgaria, Micro-credentials were immediately incorporated into the soft-skill training programme, and trainees were encouraged and supported to make use of them *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

Institutional quality

The context factors related to institutional quality were mainly described as hindering the work of the coalition. Nevertheless, some enabling elements can also be identified. According to the observations of an employer representative, the SYNCLUSIVE coalition operated in a context where *no harmful policies* directly obstructed its activities, making the key issue not regulatory barriers but *the extent to which public institutions are willing and able to facilitate connections* between employers and job- and mobility-seekers *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. On the enabling side, institutions appeared to remain formally open to engagement and do not openly rejected participation in coalition activities. This *formal openness* provided the coalition with access to relevant stakeholders and opportunities to build working relationships. Institutional support was also reflected in symbolic forms of participation, such as the Employment Agency's endorsement of the initiative through signing the coalition agreement and displaying information about the initiative *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*. The existence of senior institutional contacts who acted as coalition access points *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)* further demonstrated that channels for cooperation could be established within public bodies.

At the same time, several factors limited the depth and effectiveness of this engagement. Public institutions were *constrained by political and budgetary conditions* that reduced their capacity to contribute beyond their existing mandates and programmes. Rather than explicitly declining involvement, institutional actors often signalled disengagement by referring to activities they were already implementing, indicating a limited willingness or ability to take on additional responsibilities. *Political instability* was a particularly significant constraint, as frequent early elections created uncertainty and discouraged officials from making commitments that extended beyond short-term political horizons. This instability also affected the continuity of institutional relationships, as illustrated by the sudden removal of a senior coalition contact from their position for reasons beyond the coalition's control. *Budget delays* further reinforced these constraints *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. As a result, formal participation often prevailed over substantive contribution, raising concerns about the strength of collaboration and commitment within the coalition. This pattern was particularly visible in the Employment Agency's involvement, which remained largely symbolic rather than operational, with limited active support for referring unemployed individuals to training opportunities, presumably due to the absence of contractual obligations and restricted staff capacity *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

Labour market structure

The labour market and institutional environment created both opportunities and significant constraints for stakeholder engagement. An important enabling factor was the coalition's adoption of a cross-cutting target group approach focused on women and people aged 50+, which allowed engagement with a broad range of employers while avoiding exclusive relationships with individual companies. As a public interest organisation, the coalition leader must avoid arrangements that could be perceived as favouring a single employer or contravening state aid rules, making this broad-based strategy an important mechanism for

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maintaining legitimacy and employer outreach. Participation was also more readily achievable among large companies, which have stronger incentives to engage due to workforce turnover challenges and external pressures related to ESG reporting. The ENGINE model was therefore considered more viable in relation to large employers *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

At the same time, several factors hindered coalition expansion and sustained stakeholder involvement. Public organisations such as municipal companies, cultural institutions and schools operate under more extensive regulatory requirements than private employers, which might constrain their flexibility to participate in coalition activities. The coalition model also required long-term commitment and significant time investment - conditions that could discourage stakeholder engagement, especially in respect of SMEs. The business case for participation was also uneven across company size. While large employers could absorb the costs of workforce development activities, SMEs often lacked sufficient personnel and organisational capacity to justify investment in upskilling and mobility-oriented initiatives. For smaller firms, the effort required to train employees and subsequently fill resulting vacancies was considered disproportionate to the potential benefits. Competition between companies presented an additional obstacle, as the participation of one employer from a particular sector might deter others from joining due to concerns about revealing internal challenges, such as labour shortages, to competitors *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. More broadly, the heterogeneous nature of the Sofia labour market created a structural challenge for coalition building: large and international companies generally possess the resources to address workforce issues independently and therefore have limited need for coalition support, whereas smaller companies that might benefit most from participation frequently lack the capacity to engage. This tension limited the coalition's ability to simultaneously attract stakeholders with both the need and the capability to participate actively:

"Those who have capacity don't have the need of us, and those who have the need of us don't have capacity to participate". *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*

Economic situation

The labour market in Sofia is characterised by both significant workforce shortages and changing employer recruitment strategies, creating a mixed environment for engagement.

On the enabling side, Bulgaria faces substantial labour shortages, with large numbers of unfilled positions and declining labour market participation *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. In Sofia, the demand for workers exceeds the number of available jobseekers, particularly in occupations requiring specific technical qualifications such as electricians, welders, locksmiths, and installers *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. At the same time, demographic and labour market developments create potential opportunities for the coalition's inclusion agenda. People aged 50+ are increasingly active and willing to remain in employment, partly due to low pension levels, while a reversal in migration trends has led to more Bulgarians returning to the country, including students *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. These conditions align with the coalition's focus on labour market inclusion and workforce development.

However, several labour market dynamics reduced employers' incentives to engage with the coalition. Although personnel shortages are significant, employers have increasingly

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addressed them by recruiting groups of workers from third countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Kazakhstan through specialised agencies. These workers are perceived as less costly and more easily replaceable, making this strategy more attractive than investing in the recruitment and integration of vulnerable domestic groups. Consequently, many employers saw limited value in engaging with the SYNCLUSIVE's offer *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

At the same time, broader economic developments have reduced labour demand in some sectors, with job vacancies declining, some businesses closing, especially outside Sofia, and employers increasingly relying on automation and organisational adaptation rather than new recruitment. *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase).* These trends are accompanied by longer-term structural challenges, including low wages, difficulties in the transition from education to quality employment, uncertainty regarding qualification needs, and changing worker preferences towards more flexible forms of work *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. Together, these factors limited the immediate demand for coalition-supported interventions despite the persistence of labour shortages and inclusion challenges.

Education and training system

According to the opinions of coalition members, the Bulgarian education and training system created both structural challenges and several opportunities that supported the coalition's work.

One enabling factor was the strong demand for workers with secondary technical qualifications, created by the disappearance of many former secondary technical schools. This skills shortage increases the value of collaboration with educational and training centres and creates a clear need for responsive training initiatives. Another important enabling factor was the presence of people aged 50+ who possess technical qualifications and substantial professional experience. Beyond serving as employees, they can act as mentors for younger workers, while some individuals with highly specialised expertise have the potential to become trainers themselves *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. The coalition's focus on digital, personal, and soft skills was also perceived as a major strength, as these areas are insufficiently addressed by existing state-supported or employer-provided training and are particularly relevant for older workers and women seeking labour market re-entry or career mobility *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

At the same time, several factors hindered the coalition's work. Bulgaria's limited participation in lifelong learning, combined with employers' short-term workforce planning, makes it difficult to address long-term skills needs through traditional education pathways. Although the country has a large network of vocational education and training centres, their high degree of specialisation has reduced flexibility and mobility between qualifications. Additional barriers arise from the fragmentation of the training system. National employment agency programmes remain narrowly focused on occupation-specific skills, while links between different types and levels of training are weak *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*.

A mismatch between the coalition's intervention focus and employer demand has also been identified. While training in digital and personal skills was viewed positively, employers

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emphasised shortages in technical occupations and suggested a stronger need for vocational qualifications:

"The training courses you do are great, because they will need digital skills, for sure, communication skills for sure. But there comes a point when, if you redirect this to be more technical, then the focus becomes different and you become one of the few who will offer it, anyway. Right now, if you open training catalogues, just in Sofia, of companies that offer it, you will see that the training courses are more or less the same and they are tied to the basic things that people need to know, which I say again, they are necessary and important, but if we want it to have a deeper meaning and focus on a problem that is currently in Bulgaria, they need to be more specifically targeted. On what the larger companies really need." *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*

Furthermore, certificates issued by NGOs do not have the same recognition as those provided by state-certified training organisations, particularly for public-sector employers *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*. The coalition also faced challenges in scaling its activities due to the disconnect between employer-led and NGO-led training. The ongoing digitalisation created additional pressure for continuous adaptation of both the training system and the coalition's activities *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*. This limited the value and reach of coalition-supported training and suggested a need for partnerships with certified providers or for obtaining certification directly *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

Cultural attitudes toward target groups

The work of the local coalition was shaped by a combination of enabling and constraining factors related to the situation of people aged 50+, employer attitudes, and broader social dynamics.

Many people over 45 are pointed as not accustomed to taking responsibility for their own professional development in terms of planning, decision-making, and financing training activities *(interview with trainer, sustainability phase)*. In addition, while older workers are recognised of possessing considerable experience, loyalty and other assets, they are often perceived as lacking digital skills and being less adaptable to changing labour market requirements *(interview with coalition member, formation phase)*. These characteristics were identified as potential barriers to participation in training and employment initiatives.

Simultaneously, the same target group provided important opportunities for the coalition. People aged 50+ are increasingly valued by some employers for their maturity, loyalty, responsibility, knowledge, and professional experience. Although age discrimination remains widespread, with many employers reluctant to recruit workers over 50 and some recruitment processes reportedly filtering out candidates above 45 through AI algorithms *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*, there are signs of changing attitudes. Some employers actively seek older workers, while managers who themselves belong to the 50+ age group may be particularly supportive of this workforce *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. Thus, age could function simultaneously as a source of exclusion and as an asset that strengthened the coalition's mission.

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The coalition's strategic focus on people aged 50+ was another enabling factor. This group is broadly relatable and less politically contentious, making it easier to build support among stakeholders. However, the coalition also faced internal tensions regarding its objectives and methods. Differences existed between more worker-centred approaches, which prioritised individuals' capacities and aspirations, and business-centred approaches, which emphasised responding to employer demand. These debates reflected wider societal questions about balancing business continuity with social inclusion, particularly in contexts where employers increasingly recruit third-country workers while vulnerable local groups remain excluded *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

Finally, broader cultural and relational factors affected the coalition's ability to build partnerships and expand its activities. A tendency towards individualism and distrust of unfamiliar organisations means that people are more likely to engage with actors they already know and trust. This created challenges for coalition-building and stakeholder engagement, especially among employers *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*. Companies operating in the same sector might be unwilling to participate alongside competitors *(interview with coalition members, formation phase)*, and trust in the coalition itself appeared to require long-term relationship-building that extends beyond a single project cycle *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*. As a result, developing sustained credibility and trusted networks was both a prerequisite for and a challenge to the coalition's long-term effectiveness.

1.6.2 Coalition-level mechanisms

1.6.2.1 Coalition formation

The coalition formation phase in SofiaLab can be broadly described as spanning the period from the start of the SYNCLUSIVE project to the launch of the first intervention, with coalition-building activities being most intensive between mid-2023 and the end of 2024.

Member participation & diversity

At the formation phase, member participation was the primary challenge to the local coalition in Sofia. The lead organisation struggled to define a clear value proposition and entry point into a highly regulated labour market. While the partners knew how to use recruitment channels and tested a wide range of approaches, including job platforms, municipal employers, labour unions, chambers of commerce, professional associations, organisations working with specific target groups, individual companies, and unemployed people, these efforts were largely unsuccessful because stakeholders required specific information about the expected parameters and benefits, job opportunities, training outcomes, or certifications that the project could not clearly offer. The coalition also found it difficult to position itself among established labour-market actors with clearly defined roles and services. Public employment schemes often offer longer-term support, funding, recognised qualifications, and established procedures. This led to delayed recruitment and implementation, as significant effort was spent defining the offer rather than delivering activities, and to low engagement, especially from employers. Since recruitment depended heavily on a few committed partners, there were difficulties in scaling the coalition. Coalition partners themselves had to spend

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substantial effort defining their role and differentiating the project from existing labour-market actors.

To overcome these challenges, the partners gradually built a core coalition involving an HR company, the Employment Agency, and several employers, to improve access to the target group. These actors provided legitimacy, access to participants, and existing recruitment channels. Collaboration with public authorities and employment services increased credibility and reach. Subsequently, the small/core/nuclear coalition implemented ENGINE, while the larger was learning from the experience of the smaller circle and was trying to use it to translate this experience into some policies or measures or scaling up. A core main media partner and other media were also identified as needed partners to be attracted.

Collaboration & commitment

At the outset of the coalition, the core partners were trying to develop a complementary recruitment and service-delivery structure in which each partner has a distinct role. The Employment Agency was expected to contribute by increasing access to potential candidates from the target group and by connecting the coalition with relevant state-supported programmes, which might strengthen outreach and legitimacy. Since the role of the Employment Agency was seen as primarily supportive and intermediary, the effectiveness of recruitment was largely depending on the capacity and performance of the HR agency, which was expected to take the lead in identifying, attracting and matching unemployed individuals with employment opportunities. At the same time, the lead partner played a strategic coordination role by designing the intervention offer, providing expertise and facilitating agreements on responsibilities within the coalition, in order to ensure coherence and alignment among partners. These arrangements were crucial for more effective recruitment processes, clearer division of tasks and stronger support for beneficiaries, ultimately improving employment outcomes for the target group. However, from the very beginning, some partners felt connected rather to the mission than to the coalition:

"We don't have specific role in this project, just a joint press-conference to bring the public attention to the labour situation of people 50+, and using your premises for a joint training of people in this age. We see you as a key partner in our broader activity in this field." *(interview with coalition member, formation phase)*

Communication & knowledge sharing

The collaborative development of training interventions by the lead organisation, employers and the HR agency demonstrated a strong process of knowledge sharing, where partners exchanged insights on labour market needs, recruitment challenges, and the skills required by both jobseekers and employers. This shared knowledge was likely to result in more relevant and responsive training programmes, better employment outcomes for participants, and a stronger supply of qualified candidates for employers. Stakeholders benefited from access to each other's expertise, enabling more informed decision-making and a better understanding of emerging needs and opportunities. An important enabling factor was the long-standing cooperation among the organisations, which had built trust, regular communication channels, and confidence in the quality of information exchanged.

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Trust & stakeholder relationships

The coalition's experience suggested that trust and stakeholder relationships could support future collaboration, as positive past cooperation increased partners' willingness to engage in new joint initiatives and strengthened confidence in working together. For stakeholders, this could lead to greater continuity of partnerships, improved coordination, and more effective sharing of resources and expertise. However, the potential impact of the SYNCLUSIVE offer appeared constrained by its limited clarity and competitiveness, particularly because the interventions could not guarantee jobs or provide widely recognised certifications, which may have reduced its attractiveness to both employers and jobseekers. An additional hindering factor was that employers were generally unaccustomed and hence, distrustful to working with NGOs to address workforce needs and tended to rely on established recruitment channels, potentially limiting their engagement with the coalition.

1.6.2.2 Coalition sustainability

For the local coalition in Sofia, the sustainability phase covered the period during which the coalition's core intervention: the delivery of free training courses to the target group, was implemented. This phase extended from November 2024 to November 2025.

Governance & leadership

Coalition members repeatedly emphasized that the coalition is intentionally informal, flexible, and based on voluntary collaboration. Leadership was exercised through coordination by Sofia Lab and SDA, who convened partners, organized events, and steered the training interventions, but without rigid governance procedures. This informality was portrayed as an advantage: it allowed quick adaptation of training content, responsive engagement with employers, and personalised support for participants. Contextual factors—such as Bulgaria's centralized employment governance and institutional norms that favour formal state programs—made this flexible, bottom-up leadership style even more important, because it enabled the coalition to act where formal institutions were slow or poorly aligned with the needs of people 50+. Coalition members implicitly suggested that the coalition's effectiveness stemmed from this balance: enough structure to coordinate activities and maintain continuity, but enough flexibility to adjust interventions, integrate employer feedback, and respond to the lived realities of older jobseekers. This adaptive leadership approach was described as essential for designing relevant training courses, implementing them efficiently, and sustaining engagement across diverse actors *(group discussion of coalition members, sustainability phase)*.

A coalition member described the leadership approach as characterised by openness, purpose-driven decision-making, and focused on long-term value rather than immediate results. For stakeholders, this type of governance and leadership was likely to have fostered trust, commitment, and continued engagement by emphasising shared goals and intrinsic motivation. A potential barrier was the expectation of slow and less visible short-term results, which could have challenged the sustained motivation of some participants while an important enabling factor was the perceived authenticity and openness of the leadership:

"I like the leadership because it is open and is motivated by the sense and no other motives. You just should not expect fast results and should not do the things because of the results.

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Do it because of the sense and the results will come." *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*

Member participation & diversity

The coalition members described the coalition as an informal network of organisations, including NGOs, employers, recruitment companies, municipal bodies, national institutions, and training providers. Their participation varied according to organisational role and the stage of the intervention: employers were most actively involved in adapting training activities and meeting directly with trainees, NGOs and training providers led implementation, while municipal and national institutions contributed mainly through activation events and strategic coordination, although the Employment Agency was expected to contribute additional support through access to labour market measures and financial incentives for employers hiring participants from the target group. Coalition members noted that the involvement of public institutions increased the visibility of the project and created opportunities for future policy influence. They also indicated that contextual factors, such as the limited HR capacity of SMEs, employers' low awareness of state support programmes, and the project's funding arrangements, influenced both the level and consistency of participation. Coalition members further suggested that stronger involvement from employers and small businesses would have improved the alignment between training provision and labour market needs, while the diversity of members enhanced the quality and sustainability of the interventions through the complementary contributions of employers, NGOs, and public institutions *(group discussion of coalition members, sustainability phase)*.

Collaboration & commitment

The coalition members described collaboration and commitment among partners as strong and largely driven by a shared recognition of the need to support people aged 50+ facing age discrimination, digital skills gaps, and other labour market barriers. They portrayed the coalition as a "coalition of the willing," in which engagement depended on motivation, sector-specific needs, and existing relationships rather than formal commitments. Coalition members also indicated that contextual factors such as limited employer awareness, SMEs' restricted HR capacity, and the centralised structure of employment policy had reduced the level of engagement of some employers. Despite these constraints, they considered the strong commitment of core partners, including NGOs, trainers, municipal authorities, and several employers, to have contributed to more effective intervention design and implementation by ensuring that training reflected labour market needs, providing comprehensive support to beneficiaries, and creating a more sustainable and responsive model than formal institutions alone could have achieved. They further highlighted that the coalition's informal and flexible style of collaboration had enabled partners to adapt quickly to emerging needs and maintain their engagement throughout the intervention period *(group discussion of coalition members, sustainability phase)*.

Communication & knowledge sharing

Communication and knowledge sharing served as an important mechanism for coordinating activities, exchanging experiences, and adapting interventions to participants' needs. Information was shared through meetings, forums, consultations, and joint events, enabling coalition members, employers, trainers, and institutional actors to exchange feedback and lessons learned. This continuous interaction supported the adjustment of training content,

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alignment with labour market needs, and the integration of practical and psychological support, thereby enhancing the relevance and sustainability of project activities.

The mechanism also contributed to stakeholder engagement. Respondents suggested that more frequent updates, consultations, and opportunities for employers to observe training activities could further strengthen stakeholders' sense of ownership and belonging to the project. In particular, greater involvement of employers was expected to increase their awareness of the project's benefits and encourage stronger commitment and participation. More regular communication with all coalition members was similarly viewed as a way to foster a sense of being active contributors to, rather than external observers of, project development.

"I mainly followed what you were doing on LinkedIn, how far the people you were developing had gotten, and so on. But if you want this to improve and the partners to feel like a whole, there need to be more frequent meetings to discuss what has happened, what happens next, what the feedback is, and so on. I think that would be the key. Even if they are online, they don't have to be live. They can be online for a 20-minute briefing, just to discuss some things, and then employers will probably be more open, and all partners, not just employers, all partners, because they will be together, and an open table always gives everyone the opportunity to share their opinion." *(interview with coalition member, sustainability phase)*

Communication and knowledge sharing further revealed the need for greater methodological alignment across partner countries. As partners worked with different target groups and contexts, respondents stressed the importance of common and measurable indicators, including quantitative targets, to assess progress and compare outcomes. The delayed or missed communication of such shared evaluation frameworks limited the coalition members' ability to track achievements consistently and generate comparable evidence of success.

Several environmental factors acted as enablers of this mechanism, including shared professional backgrounds, previous experience in European projects, and a common professional language among partners. These factors facilitated trust and effective knowledge exchange. At the same time, differences in national contexts, target groups, institutional settings, and organisational capacities created barriers to communication and outcome comparison. Without clear communication processes and shared evaluation standards, these external factors could hinder collective learning and the assessment of project impact.

Trust & stakeholder relationships

Trust and stakeholder relationships emerged as an important mechanism supporting collaboration within the coalition and engagement with external stakeholders. The coalition's informal and voluntary structure further facilitated relationship building by encouraging dialogue, feedback, and flexible responses to emerging needs.

Trust strengthened coordination among NGOs, trainers, municipal bodies, and some employers, contributing to more responsive implementation, collaborative problem solving, and greater sustainability of project activities. It also supported the coalition's role as a bridge between employers and older jobseekers or employees seeking career mobility. However, coalition members noted that establishing this intermediary role and gaining employers' trust required considerable time, while the project's limited duration constrained the depth of relationship building. As a result, continued initiatives beyond the project were viewed as

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necessary to achieve broader and more lasting effects. Stronger trust and stakeholder relationships had the potential to increase employers' willingness to engage in project activities and support age-inclusive employment practices, while improving opportunities and support for older workers. For coalition partners, trust could enhance commitment, collaboration, and the sustainability of outcomes.

Coalition members described trust as having been built through long-standing cooperation, previous European projects, shared goals, and open communication. At the same time, external barriers were identified. Coalition members highlighted the lack of widely recognised examples, common approaches, or leadership across countries, which limited opportunities to demonstrate proven practices and encourage employer participation. Differences in incentives between public and private organisations, employers' limited awareness of relevant public programmes, and the restricted HR capacity of many SMEs also reduced opportunities to build trust and strengthen stakeholder engagement.

1.6.2.3 Coalition institutionalization

In SofiaLab, the beginning of the coalition's institutionalisation phase could be considered to have coincided with the completion of the training programme at the end of 2025. At that time, the coalition started to reflect on the lessons learned; on the assets of SYNCLUSIVE and how to promote their societal uptake, including as internal working practices of coalition members; and on the unresolved challenges and possible strategies to address them in similar future initiatives.

Governance & leadership

Governance and leadership served as a key mechanism for coordinating the coalition and maintaining stakeholder engagement. The lead organisation acted as the central driver, bringing partners together, managing relationships, balancing diverse expectations, and creating roles for coalition members. This leadership supported cooperation and continuity, although it required significant effort that the leader of the coalition assessed as not been formally included in the project design. The coalition became more formalised through a non-binding declaration signed several months after its establishment. This was seen positively, as helped provide structure and visibility while preserving flexibility; but coalition members noted a continuing tension between informal collaboration and formal governance *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

The mechanism contributed to stakeholder coordination, engagement, and collective action; however, its effectiveness was limited by the lack of clearly documented roles and responsibilities. The goodwill-based coalition agreement did not establish formal obligations, reducing accountability and clarity. Coalition members therefore suggested that future initiatives should specify partner commitments more explicitly. While the voluntary nature of participation facilitated collaboration, it also acted as an external barrier to stronger governance structures and long-term sustainability *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

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Member participation & diversity

Member participation and diversity functioned as an important mechanism shaping both coalition formation and implementation. The coalition was intentionally broad, bringing together ministries, research institutes, municipal bodies, businesses, HR organisations, and NGOs. This diversity facilitated coalition formation because different actors recognised potential benefits from participation and contributed complementary perspectives, expertise, and resources. This mechanism had the potential to increase the reach, legitimacy, and relevance of project activities by involving a broad range of stakeholders, while also creating opportunities for resource sharing and collaboration. However, coalition members noted that diversity also created management challenges, as organisations differed in their agendas, levels of commitment, and organisational cultures. Differences in institutional priorities, organisational capacities, and motivation acted as barriers, making sustained participation more difficult and placing additional demands on coalition coordination and relationship management. A distinction emerged between organisations for which labour market inclusion was a core mission and those for which it was a more peripheral concern. The former tended to remain consistently engaged, while the latter required more intensive relationship building and coordination to sustain their participation *(interview with coalition members, institutionalisation phase)*.

Coalition members also distinguished between a core coalition and a wider coalition. The core coalition worked closely throughout the project, building on relationships that had existed before SYNCLUSIVE. In contrast, participation in the wider coalition was more episodic, with members contributing to specific activities such as job fairs, information dissemination, training observation, or communication events. As a result, only a limited number of organisations could be considered continuously and substantively engaged *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

Collaboration & commitment

Collaboration and commitment functioned as an important mechanism for translating coalition membership into collective action. Commitment was most evident in the implementation of intervention activities, with stakeholders contributing to lectures, mock interviews, curriculum development, and employment opportunities, whereas sustained strategic engagement proved more difficult to maintain. To support ongoing collaboration, the lead organisation relied on personal networks, informal coordination, and opportunities for stakeholder visibility. This mechanism facilitated the mobilisation of diverse expertise, resources, and opportunities, generating benefits for both employers and participants. However, its effectiveness was constrained by several external factors, including the internal governance procedures of large companies, the existence of alternative programmes within public institutions, and the absence of formal incentives for broader coalition members without contractual obligations. These factors contributed to uneven levels of commitment across stakeholder groups and increased the coordination burden placed on coalition leadership.

Communication & knowledge sharing

Coalition members saw the shared success stories of intervention participants as the strongest motivator for coalition members, far more effective than statistics, because they showed tangible impact and reinforced shared ownership of results. They felt the Realist Evaluation

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cycle was too slow to sustain momentum, as findings arrived after the coalition had already moved on.

Transnational learning was limited, relying only on written briefs rather than direct peer exchange, which the respondent viewed as insufficiently engaging for coalition members. The project's *transnational design* was found as *limiting meaningful cross-national learning,* because exchange occurred only through written briefs rather than direct inter-coalition contact, which would have been more motivating. Such direct interaction could have enabled richer discussion of shared challenges like third-country labour recruitment, demographic change, and retirement-age reforms. The project's research design (particularly the *Realist Evaluation timeline*) was flagged as a structural disconnect: by the time evaluation findings were available, the coalition momentum had already moved on *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*.

Trust & stakeholder relationships

Trust functioned as a central mechanism in the formation and operation of the coalition. The coalition was initially established largely through pre-existing interpersonal and organisational trust in the lead organisation, with many stakeholders agreeing to participate despite having limited knowledge of the other partners. In the Bulgarian context, coalition-building relied predominantly on informal trust-based relationships rather than formal institutional arrangements, requiring continuous relational work and personal engagement from the lead organisation to sustain participation. This mechanism generated several outcomes: it facilitated stakeholder recruitment and coalition stability, strengthened collaboration, and created valuable networking opportunities through access to partners' contacts, expertise, and institutional networks, which became a benefit in its own right beyond the project's formal objectives.

The effectiveness of the trust mechanism was shaped by several contextual factors, including a strong cultural preference among employers for working with familiar and trusted actors, the dependence on prior relationships within the labour market, ambiguity regarding partner roles, and the limited duration of a single project. Stakeholders recognised that sustained trust, particularly among employers, would require longer-term collaboration extending beyond the lifespan of one project.

Other mechanisms

Visibility and media exposure functioned as a mechanism that supported stakeholder retention by providing public recognition and opportunities to demonstrate social responsibility. This generated reputational benefits for participating organisations and helped maintain engagement among less active partners. Its effectiveness was likely influenced by the value stakeholders placed on public image and the availability of opportunities for external visibility, although its influence may have diminished over time without tangible results.

The novelty of the coalition's approach facilitated initial stakeholder engagement by stimulating interest in a new form of cross-sector collaboration. This contributed to stakeholder mobilisation and willingness to participate in coalition activities. The mechanism was likely strengthened in contexts where existing labour market approaches were perceived as insufficient

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Training quality operated as a mechanism that reinforced participant engagement through positive learning experiences. High-quality delivery increased confidence in the programme and motivated participants to enrol in subsequent training activities. This resulted in stronger participant retention and enhanced perceptions of coalition credibility. Its effectiveness was influenced by the relevance of the training content, the competence of trainers, and the extent to which training responded to participants' needs.

1.6.3 *Summarizing findings along Coalition-level CMOs*

1.6.3.1. Inflow of vulnerable jobseekers

Coalition members generally viewed the inflow of jobseekers as problematic. Initially, the targeted focus on the group was perceived as a potentially effective mechanism, enabling coordinated efforts to engage a large number of employers and convince them that some or all of their vacancies were suitable for people aged 50+. This approach was expected to help shift employers' mindsets and contribute to overcoming age-related stereotypes.

At the outset of the interventions, even the registration of jobseekers for training courses was at risk. Employer-driven recruitment proved ineffective, while the wider coalition, including the employment agency, did not actively refer participants despite the agency's formal involvement. The core coalition compensated by mobilising its own networks and free channels, such as a job-search platform. Subsequently, the quality of the training experience encouraged some participants to enrol voluntarily in further courses.

However, the matching efforts encountered significant barriers. While the employers engaged in the SYNCLUSIVE initiative at SofiaLab appreciated efforts to improve participants' general competences, including digital, green, and soft skills, they primarily sought candidates with specific professional, mainly technical, qualifications. In addition, many vacancies involved working conditions that members of the target group were often unable or unwilling to accommodate, such as outdoor work or jobs located outside the city.

The coalition members' views allow formulation of the following Content-Mechanism-Output (CMO) statements:

1) Labour market integration initiatives focused on specific target group can change employers' mindset

Mechanism: An initiative focused only on the specific target group (people 50+) can meet with a great number of employers to discuss their job positions one by one and convince them that at least part of them is suitable for target group representatives.
Outcomes: The way of thinking of employers can be changed and many positions for the target group open.

Context facilitators: Some employers themselves are aged 50+ and sympathise with their generation. Many have already experienced the weaknesses of working collectives, compound of young people only, and/or praise some qualities of older workers as loyalty, maturity and professional experience.

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Hindering factors: People 50 + in Bulgaria are victims of widespread stereotypes and discrimination among the employers and younger generations as a whole. Many employers perceive them as less effective at work and unable to adapt to changing environment.

Overarching CMO: If people 50+ in Bulgaria are largely rejected by employers due to stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, **then** a focused initiative concentrated on this target group only would be able to meet with a large number of employers and discuss with them the feasibility of employing person aged 50+ at every job opening they have. **Because** specific and practical examples of where people 50+ can be employed convince employers of their employability, this **may lead to** change of employers' mindset and opening of many positions for representatives of the target group.

2) Coalition networks enable participant recruitment despite limited employer and Employment Agency engagement

Mechanism: The partners from the core coalition used their own networks and free channels, as Facebook and job advertisement websites, to promote the training courses among the target group and to secure inflow of both older jobseekers and employees to the intervention activities. Subsequently, the quality of training courses triggered the complementary mechanism of "word of mouth".

Outcomes: Participants for the training courses have been successfully recruited, and more than 100 training completions were achieved.

Context facilitators: The core coalition partners have a long-standing experience in working with diverse vulnerable groups that provided options for reach-out. The right choice of Facebook and the most popular job-search website as channels that are widely used by older people contributed to the overall success.

Hindering factors: The engagement of the Employment Agency with referral of jobseekers to the training courses was not as extensive as expected. Furthermore, practically no employers enrolled their employees aged 50+ in the first training. As a result, the successful start of the interventions was put at risk. In addition, in Sofia, as a capital city, there are numerous training courses advertised, including on topics chosen for the interventions in SofiaLab (e.g. digital, green and soft skills courses).

Overarching CMO: If employers were unwilling to engage with the coalition, and some wider coalition members did not actively refer participants, **then** the core coalition used its own networks and free channels to advertise the training courses. **Because** target group representatives have been informed through popular channels and attracted by the free access and actual topics of the training courses; and subsequently, because the first participants have been satisfied with the training quality, **as a result,** inflow was achieved through individually-driven channels rather than employer or wider-coalition pipelines, and some participants were retained for a follow-up training.

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3) Combining general skills with job-specific qualifications strengthens the inflow of vulnerable jobseekers into employment

Mechanism: Interventions providing digital, green and soft skills can equip people 50+ with broadly sought knowledge and skills and boost their self-confidence. When these general skills are complemented by updated qualifications or requalification corresponding to specific high-demand job positions, participants can also meet the qualification requirements of employers engaged in SYNCLUSIVE.

Outcomes: Increased motivation, self-confidence and preparedness for job interviews, combined with relevant job-specific qualifications, can increase participants' chances of qualifying for interviews and accessing available job opportunities, thereby strengthening the inflow of vulnerable jobseekers into employment.

Context facilitators: General skills, such as digital, green and soft skills, are useful and expected almost universally. Strong market demand for specific professions can provide employment opportunities when jobseekers possess the corresponding qualifications and professional profiles.

Hindering factors: The company profiles may differ substantially from the backgrounds of the target group, while jobseekers' professional profiles are very diverse. Some employers' activities also take place in different settlements. Differences in required qualifications, professional profiles, jobseekers' interests and working conditions can therefore make matching jobseekers with available opportunities more difficult.

Overarching CMO: If digital, green and soft skills are universally applicable and useful for people 50+ in their job-seeking and career development, while specific professions are broadly demanded in the country and by the engaged employers, and intervention participants have diverse professional backgrounds, **then** an intervention design combining general skills with specific professional qualifications and closer matching between jobseekers' and employers' profiles can better connect labour supply and demand, **because** jobseekers can gain both broadly applicable skills and the specific qualifications required for job openings that correspond to their interests and working conditions. **As a result,** the intervention can strengthen the inflow of vulnerable jobseekers into employment.

1.6.3.2. Upward / Sideward mobility of employees

Coalition members expressed more pessimistic views regarding employee mobility than regarding the inflow of jobseekers. Employed training participants were ultimately recruited individually from diverse backgrounds rather than through employer pipelines, and the number of employed participants achieved generally did not depend on the wider coalition.

Furthermore, the coalition did not succeed in linking training participation to promotion pathways. While preparing newcomers can bring benefits through their fresh perspectives, employers more often preferred to develop existing staff, as this was perceived as a faster and easier process. At the same time, employers described internal promotion as challenging because finding a replacement can take a year or more, making them reluctant to promote

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employees solely for the purpose of individual development. In many companies, the structure of the job positions does not allow internal mobility or at least requires serious process of requalification. An additional barrier identified was that members of the target group - people aged 50+, were perceived as more hesitant about career changes and in need of more time to accept them compared with younger employees.

As a more realistic alternative, two separate tracks were proposed: one focused on individual upskilling and the other on encouraging employers to hire from the target group, not necessarily within the same organisation or timeframe.

"You help both sides, but not obligatory within one and the same organisation simultaneously." *(interview with coalition member, institutionalisation phase)*

1) Barriers to employers' engagement limit ENGINE and internal mobility.

Mechanism: As a public interest organisation, the lead organisation couldn't partner exclusively with a single private employer, as this would risk violating de minimis state aid rules and appear as market interference. The cross-cutting target group focus (women, 50+) was adopted as a strategy to maintain a broad employer reach without favouring any single company.

Outcomes: Although some employers enrolled their employees in the training courses, the numbers of engaged employers and respectively, of their employees involved, was low; the ENGINE model failed to be fully implemented as there was no internal mobility outcome identified resulting from the interventions.

Context facilitators: Older employees feel the need and have strong desire to develop. Many like their organisations, are loyal to their employers, and would prefer internal career development instead of taking risk to move elsewhere.

Hindering factors: Large companies from one and the same sector refrained from participating in common initiatives as SYNCLUSIVE, as they were afraid that some sensitive information about their companies might be revealed to competitors. For SMEs, the effort and cost of training one person to move up and then backfilling their position was felt disproportionate for a small company.

Overarching CMO: If the ENGINE model – which assumes that upskilling existing employees creates vacancy chains for incoming jobseekers – requires large employers or non-competitive sectors to function, **then** the lead organisation as a public-interest organisation cannot partner exclusively with a single employer due to state aid considerations, and is not able to partner with SMEs that predominate the region's employer landscape, for whom the business case does not hold. **Because** coalition members may therefore not see upward or sideward mobility as a realistic or relevant goal within the current project design, **as a result**, there is no coalition-level outcome related to upward or sideward employee mobility.

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2) Decoupling upskilling from internal mobility enables parallel support for employees and employer

Mechanism: The coalition provided upskilling opportunities to employees who came independently, without the participation of their employer in SYNCLUSIVE initiative. Simultaneously, support for employers to improve their inclusive practices regarding people 50+ continued as a separate track.

Outcomes: Employers were encouraged to consider development of older workers, without obligatory connecting training with internal mobility; and older employees were supported in their career development, not obligatory within the same companies.

Context facilitators: Many older employees in Bulgaria experience job dissatisfaction and/or insecurity that attracted them to participate in the interventions on their own accord.

Hindering factors: In many companies, the job positions differ significantly in terms of type of qualification and transitions within the company are hardly feasible. The training of the employees provided by the employer frequently is relevant for their current positions only. The majority of employers experience hardship to recruit candidates for the low-level, and not for medium- and high-level positions. Many companies are not interested in upskilling and reskilling of employees, but only in inflow of jobseekers.

Overarching CMO: If employers found internal promotion unfeasible or risky due to lengthy replacement processes, and both employees and employers experience challenges in the process of sideward or upward mobility within the same company, **then,** instead of linking training participation to internal mobility within the same organisation, the coalition separated support for the employees and support for the employers in different tracks. **Because** this approach did not require employers to take actions counteracting their business logic, while still supplied them with good practices; and gave opportunity to many employees to develop, regardless the practices of their employer, **as a result**, no upward or sideward mobility was an achieved outcome; but employers were more inclined to support older employees and older employees were better prepared for career changes.

1.6.3.3. Higher competitiveness of the target group

The increased competitiveness of older workers was an anticipated outcome of interventions even in the formation phase when the interventions have been designed but not commenced. The design of the interventions itself, along with the free access and the socialising opportunities that the training with peers provides, was expected to make knowledge easy to adopt and to have motivational effect on the target group representatives.

In addition, the focus on the building of soft skills as one of the main pillars of the training programme was planned to fill the gap left by state-operated training programmes and to supply intervention participants with handy job-seeking and team-work abilities that would help them to improve their labour market positioning.

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1) Easy-to-follow intervention design helps motivation and absorption of knowledge

Mechanism: The mechanism is aimed to remove several substantial learning barriers for older people: 1) financial access, by providing free training and informing that free opportunities exist; 2) “ableist” barrier, by showing the example of peers who experience the same hinders and convincing older people that they can make progress too; 3) time barrier, by easy-to-follow design of the training, helping older people to achieve results with acceptable time resources.

Outcomes: People aged 50+ acquire new relevant knowledge that increases their competitiveness and stable job prospects.

Context facilitators: With raising retirement age and low pensions, raising cost of living and unstable political and economic situation in the country, older people need stable/additional income sources to cope. In addition, they have higher health needs, sometimes requiring substantial expenses.

Hindering factors: The qualification becomes outdated as people go older, especially in the fast-developing environment and with hampered access to support for upgrade or requalification. Older people often feel they lack skills and knowledge, but also lack information what exactly they need, how to achieve it and who can help, as well as resources and confidence to change their situation.

Overarching CMO: If people aged 50+ face increasing financial pressures due to rising retirement ages, low pensions, higher living and healthcare costs, while also experiencing outdated qualifications, limited access to requalification support, and low confidence in their ability to learn, **then** providing free, accessible, and age-sensitive training that highlights successful peer examples can reduce financial, informational, motivational, and time-related barriers to participation. **Because** these interventions increase awareness of learning opportunities, strengthen self-efficacy, and make skills acquisition more achievable within available resources, **as a result**, older workers acquire relevant new knowledge and skills, contributing to enhanced labour market competitiveness and more stable employment and income prospects.

2) Soft skills training provides job-seeking and team-work abilities

Mechanism: Focusing on soft skills training, built on many practical examples of job-seeking and working relation situations, as one of the main intervention pillars, allows the easy utilisation of this knowledge still in the process of training.

Outcomes: Older people are equipped with job-seeking and team-work skills that help them improve their career prospects both in situations of unemployment and employment.
Context facilitators: There is a great variety of training programmes on language, digital and specific professional skills offered by the Employment Agency, but a gap is identified regarding soft skills training programmes.

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Hindering factors: As the very nature and importance of soft skills are largely unknown, people might not be easily attracted to enrol.

Overarching CMO: If numerous programmes address technical, language, and digital skills but relatively few focus on soft skills, **then** embedding practical, situation-based soft skills training into interventions can strengthen participants' job-seeking and workplace interaction capabilities. **Because** the immediate application of learning through realistic examples helps participants recognise the relevance and value of soft skills despite limited prior awareness of their importance, **as a result**, older adults become better equipped to navigate job-search and workplace relationships, contributing to improved career prospects in both unemployment and employment contexts.

1.6.3.4. Improved intervention co-design

The intervention achieved important advances in intervention design through a collaborative coalition approach, which combined research-based needs assessment with partners' practical expertise to develop a training programme tailored to people aged 50+ and their labour market challenges. The design process also generated broader insights into labour market inclusion and positioned the target group strategically within policy and employer discussions. However, implementation faced challenges related to sustaining partner engagement, requiring substantial unbudgeted coordination and relationship-building efforts, while differing views within the coalition regarding the appropriate thematic scope and ambition of training put in question the alignment with labour market needs. Furthermore, monitoring of design effectiveness relied largely on qualitative feedback and informal observations, limiting the availability of systematic evidence to support ongoing adaptation and learning.

1) Trusted exchange of diverse expertise enabled responsive intervention co-design

Mechanism: The diverse expertise of coalition partners enabled them to exchange experiences and knowledge, complementing empirical grounding with target-group-specific delivery experience and knowledge of general labour-market demand, particularly the demand for digital skills. Their previous collaboration facilitated discussions, and each partner trusted the information provided by the others.

Outcomes: The coalition developed a well-designed intervention that addressed the needs of the target group while also responding to general labour-market demand for digital skills.

Context facilitators: Many coalition members had collaborated on other initiatives and met on a regular basis. Their communication was smooth, and they trusted one another. Their diverse profiles contributed to a broad range of expertise, including analytical knowledge and practical experience working with various vulnerable groups.

Hindering factors: Not all partners were involved from the outset, and the level of engagement was uneven.

Overarching CMO: If coalition partners operated within a context of established relationships, regular communication, mutual trust, and complementary expertise, **then** the exchange of

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knowledge and experience across organisations enabled the co-design of an intervention that combined empirical evidence with practical insights into the needs of the target group and general labour-market demand, particularly for digital skills. **Because** partners trusted one another's contributions and were able to integrate diverse analytical and delivery perspectives despite uneven levels of engagement and the late involvement of some members, **as a result**, the coalition developed a well-designed intervention that was responsive to the needs and circumstances of the target group, while also addressing relevant labour-market skill demand.

2) Relationship management sustained collaboration, but not consensus

Mechanism: The lead organisation drew on each partner's specific expertise and invested substantial uncosted effort in relationship management to sustain contributions, as partners with a direct stake in the target group were intrinsically motivated, whereas others needed to be actively engaged and reminded of the mutual benefits of participation.

Outcomes: The intervention was co-designed with a broader range of components than a single organisation would likely have provided alone, albeit at the cost of additional coordination effort; however, disagreements regarding intervention design persisted.

Context facilitators: All partners were motivated by the potential success of the initiative and the mutual benefits that could result from it.

Hindering factors: Coalition partners varied considerably in the extent to which the target group aligned with their organisational mission. In addition, employers required job candidates with specific qualifications. monitoring of design effectiveness relied largely on qualitative feedback and informal observations, limiting the availability of systematic evidence to support ongoing adaptation and learning.

Overarching CMO: If coalition partners were motivated by the potential mutual benefits of the initiative but varied considerably in the extent to which their organisational missions and interests aligned with the target group's needs, and systematic evidence for adaptation was limited, **then** the lead organisation's active relationship management and mobilisation of partners' complementary expertise enabled their continued participation in the intervention. **Because** differing priorities and expectations, including employers' demand for specific qualifications, shaped partners' views on the intervention, **as a result**, despite ongoing collaboration, resulting in a more comprehensive co-designed intervention, disagreements regarding its design persisted with significant coordination costs and unresolved tensions.

1.6.3.5. Strengthened intervention implementation and delivery

The intervention demonstrated notable achievements in implementation and delivery through a coalition-based approach that expanded access to participants, employers, and diverse expertise, thereby enhancing the reach and relevance of activities. However, implementation was challenged by varying levels of partner commitment, reflecting differences in the extent to which the target group aligned with individual organisational priorities. The experience highlighted the importance of clearly communicating overarching objectives and measurable

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targets across all coalition members to ensure coordinated action and effective progress tracking.

1) Strategic targeting enabled broad support but did not ensure full ENGINE implementation

Mechanism: The coalition selected older adults as a target group because they constituted a broadly recognisable population with limited political opposition. This focus resonated with a wide range of stakeholders and had the potential to attract diverse partners to the SYNCLUSIVE initiative, including policymakers, employers, and the general public.

Outcomes: Interest among the target group was high, and the intervention was implemented successfully. However, the ENGINE was not implemented in full scale.

Context facilitators: There was no significant political opposition to the labour market inclusion of older workers within the country.

Hindering factors: Variations in the level of engagement among partners, reflecting differences in organisational goals and cultures, hindered the full-scale implementation.

Overarching CMO: If there was little political opposition to the labour market inclusion of older workers, but partner engagement varied due to differing organisational goals and cultures, **then** selecting older adults as a broadly recognisable and politically uncontroversial target group helped mobilise support from diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, employers, and the wider public. **Because** this focus resonated across stakeholder groups and fostered broad interest in the initiative, **as a result**, the intervention was implemented successfully and attracted strong participation from the target group; but lower engagement of some stakeholders prevented the full implementation of ENGINE.

2) Time-consuming evaluation prevented adaptation

Mechanism: The evaluation of intervention started and results came too late to serve as evidence base for adaptation.

Outcomes: The coalition lacked a timely mechanism for monitoring goal implementation.

Context facilitators: A common Realist Evaluation methodology was developed and refined that allows comparison of results across living labs.

Hindering factors: Without incentive mechanisms and financial resources envisaged for participation in research activities, a low number of intervention participants responded. The research methodology required four months between the second and the third measurement point. The project had not envisaged how and when intermediate evaluation results might be used to adapt interventions.

Overarching CMO: If the project's evaluation methodology required significant time and did not envisage incentive and intervention adaptation mechanisms, **then** evaluation findings

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were not available in time to inform implementation. **Because** delays in evaluation results limited evidence-informed adaptation of the intervention and may have reduced the motivation of some coalition members, **as a result**, delayed evaluation feedback limited timely monitoring and evidence-informed adaptation.

1.6.3.6. Improved sustainability/scaling of interventions

The intervention contributed to sustainability by establishing the coalition as a trusted intermediary between employers and individuals seeking employment or career mobility. However, the project's limited duration constrained the development of employer trust, stakeholder recognition, and sustained participation, suggesting that continued implementation through follow-up project phases would be needed to achieve lasting impact. Greater use of social media and participant success stories was also identified as an opportunity to strengthen outreach, employer engagement, and target-group participation.

1) Continued funding enables sustained activities, trust and participation

Mechanism: Continued project funding, enabling further implementation phases, combined with the promotion of a growing number of success stories through social media, would provide opportunities to build trust among employers and other stakeholders whose engagement had previously been limited.

Outcomes: Larger numbers of employers and members of the target group would be attracted to the intervention, thereby maximising its impact on the local labour market.

Context facilitators: SYNCLUSIVE had already generated tangible benefits for employers, including greater awareness of the strengths of older workers and examples of inclusive workplace practices, as well as for older workers through improved competitiveness, self-confidence, and motivation.

Hindering factors: The project operated on a relatively small scale for a capital city, and its duration was too limited to allow the development of broad stakeholder trust.

Overarching CMO: If the initial benefits for employers and older workers had already been demonstrated, but the project remained too small in scale and too short in duration to establish broad stakeholder trust, **then** funding, enabling further implementation and combined with the promotion of an expanding pool of success stories via social media, could strengthen engagement among employers and other stakeholders. **Because** visible evidence of positive outcomes can enhance credibility, reinforce the value of inclusive employment practices, and build confidence in the intervention over time, **as a result**, greater numbers of employers and older workers could be attracted to participate, thereby maximising the intervention's impact on the local labour market.

The attribution of the above CMO configurations to coalition phases is presented in Figure 2. The coalition's development can be understood as a progression through formation, sustainability and institutionalisation, although some CMOs extended across these phases. During formation (CMOs 1, 6, 7, 8 and 10), strategic targeting, responsiveness to the target

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group's needs, complementary expertise and trusted relationships created the conditions for coalition building and co-design of the intervention. Sustainability during implementation (CMOs 2, 9 and 11) depended on the coalition's capacity to mobilise alternative operational resources and networks, actively maintain partner engagement, and generate timely learning for adaptation. Institutionalisation (CMOs 3, 4, 5 and 12) reflected lessons about how the approach could be better aligned with labour-market demand, pragmatically adapted where the full ENGINE model proved difficult to implement, and continued or scaled through further funding, trust building and demonstration of successful outcomes. CMO 10 bridged formation and sustainability, while CMO 11 connected sustainability with institutionalisation, illustrating that coalition development was iterative rather than strictly sequential.

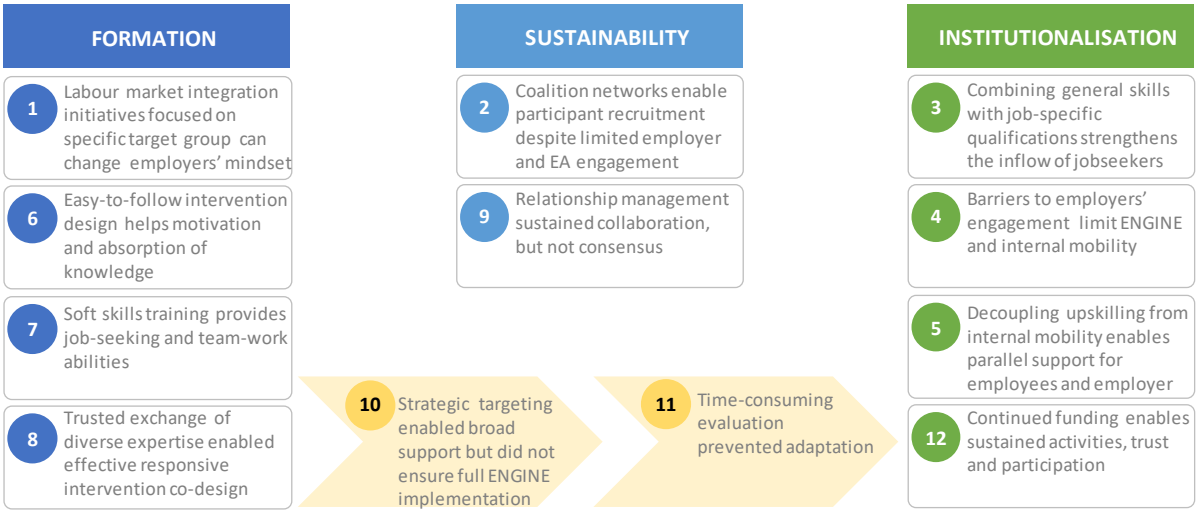

Figure 2: Mapping of coalition-level CMO configurations across the coalition phases

1.7 Realist Evaluation results – individual level

Individual-level Realist Evaluation analysis is based on 10 interviews with employees and 7 interviews with jobseekers from the treatment group; 2 interviews with jobseekers and 3 with employees from the control group; and 6 interviews with trainers (Table 18). The interviews with the target group representatives were conducted only in theory refinement phase (between December 2024 and March 2026), while the interviews with trainers were conducted between July 2024 and February 2026. The majority of the interviews were conducted online, and small part of the respondents chose to meet researchers at the research premises.

1.7.1 Individual-level general and context information

The analysis of individual-level information allowed to differentiate one type of context factors specific for the employees; two types of factors specific for the jobseekers; and eight types of factors common for the two target subgroups.

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1.7.1.1. Context factors relevant for employees

Perceived job insecurity

In fact, the majority of employees who were attracted to the training programmes and shared their experiences and insights during the in-depth interviews were motivated by perceived job insecurity. In a sense, many of them had already experienced the psychological effects of anticipated unemployment, including anxiety, fear of the future, disorientation regarding labour market demands and requirements, and a lack of confidence in their ability to find alternative employment. Our employed and self-employed interlocutors perceived their jobs and livelihoods as unstable due to a toxic workplace atmosphere, personnel cuts within their companies, declining workloads or client bases, and changes in ownership.

"That's the toxic environment. There they stifle you, there they tell you what you can and can't do and not to think for yourself, and so on…" *(employee, soft skills training)*

"But the work is decreasing more and more… due to the consolidation of the market in Bulgaria there is less and less work." *(employee, control group)*

1.7.1.2. Context factors relevant for jobseekers

Prolonged job-seeking period

Although long-term unemployment is conventionally defined as unemployment lasting more than 12 months, jobseekers in both the treatment and control groups who provided detailed information about their life circumstances tended to perceive their job-search periods as prolonged after only a few months. The weaker the feedback from potential employers and the more limited the available financial support, the more strongly they expressed a sense of prolonged job seeking. After several months, unemployed individuals had often exhausted their ideas about where and how to search for new employment. Repeatedly unsuccessful efforts led to a sense of failure and diminished self-confidence. In addition to the internalised need to acquire or improve qualifications, some unemployed participants were attracted to the training courses by the opportunity to learn about the experiences and job-search strategies of their peers.

"- What motivated you to participate in the course and what benefits did you hope to gain?

- Well, to refresh my memory on some things, to connect with other people, to communicate, to see what they are looking for… That was my main reason, and social contacts." *(jobseeker, soft skills training)*

Lack of feedback by employers

According to the jobseekers' accounts, the practice of not providing responses to applicants has become relatively common in recruitment processes in Bulgaria. Uncertainty regarding the status and outcome of job applications contributed to candidates' stress and left them unsure whether they met the job requirements, whether another applicant had been selected, whether the vacancy remained active, or even whether their application had reached the relevant decision-makers within the organisation. These uncertainties also created room for doubts about the possible influence of discriminatory practices or perceived deficiencies in the

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applicant's qualifications and experience. Moreover, the lack of feedback deprived jobseekers of an important opportunity for self-assessment and professional development.

"I'm sending my resume constantly – maybe 100 applications per week. The problem is, I don't know if HR reads those resumes, if they look at them... They don't call me back for any serious positions, because I don't know what they're looking for or what their criteria are, or why they advertise these positions on websites at all." *(jobseeker, soft skills training)*

1.7.1.3. Context factors relevant for employees and jobseekers

Age-based discrimination/ stereotypes

Both jobseekers and employees described experiencing pervasive age-based discrimination throughout their job-search and employment trajectories, particularly after the age of 40 and even more markedly after the age of 50. Many reported that while they initially received neutral consideration during the application process, recruiters' attitudes appeared to change once their age became apparent through personal information, educational history, or face-to-face interactions. Respondents perceived a strong employer preference for younger candidates, often attributing limited interview invitations and high rates of application rejection to age rather than qualifications or experience. Several participants noted that awareness of the extent of age discrimination emerged through interactions with peers in employment training programmes, where similar experiences of exclusion were widely shared. Older employees also reported beliefs that employers were reluctant to invest in their training and development due to assumptions about proximity to retirement, adaptability, or capacity for innovation, despite possessing substantial professional expertise and digital competencies. These experiences contributed to feelings of labour-market marginalisation, uncertainty about career mobility, and reduced confidence in securing suitable employment. In response, some participants adjusted their expectations, sought opportunities to demonstrate continued professional development, or pursued self-employment as an alternative to repeated rejection. Overall, their accounts suggested that age functioned as a significant barrier to labour-market participation, limiting access to employment opportunities and undermining the perceived value of accumulated skills, qualifications, and experience.

"- Well, look, when you get older, things change...
- Do they ask you how old you are?
- Yes, they definitely ask. And if you state your age, that's it." *(employee, digital skills training)*

"I was worried about putting my age in because that immediately gives you less of a chance… The moment when I gave up on realizing myself on the market, but rather to do something of my own, was the moment you go to such a younger team; and at a certain point our society itself is much more discriminatory, not even the employer itself, to look at the slightly more mature person with the idea that they are less capable." *(employee, control group)*

"First of all, I think that in our country there was a long-standing neglect of people who are close to retirement and at retirement age." *(trainer, soft skills)*

Skills felt outdated or insufficient

Older workers frequently perceived their skills and knowledge as partially outdated or insufficiently aligned with contemporary labour-market demands, particularly in relation to

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rapidly evolving digital technologies. Many described uncertainties regarding the relevance and adequacy of their existing competencies, noting that the absence of constructive feedback from employers made it difficult to identify which skills remained valuable and which required further development. Respondents emphasized a strong need for continuous learning, retraining, and skills upgrading in order to keep pace with technological change, digitalization, and emerging workplace expectations. While they possessed extensive professional experience and accumulated occupational knowledge, many felt that this experience alone was no longer sufficient in a labour market increasingly shaped by digital tools, artificial intelligence, cloud technologies, and new forms of communication. Several participants expressed concerns about declining proficiency in previously acquired skills, such as foreign languages, due to lack of use, while others identified gaps in areas such as digital marketing, presentation software, and advanced computer applications. They often viewed participation in training programmes as an opportunity to remain current, enhance employability, and demonstrate adaptability to employers. At the same time, respondents acknowledged that prolonged engagement in routine work could contribute to skill obsolescence, reinforcing the perception of falling behind technological and professional developments. Overall, their accounts reflected a strong commitment to lifelong learning, combined with concerns that their skills required continuous renewal to remain relevant in a rapidly changing employment environment.

"I have accumulated routine and knowledge, but we live in a dynamic environment, where there is artificial intelligence, the need for ecological thinking and continuous digitalization. We need to develop. When you go to a meeting in a company, given that I am 50+, they need to feel that I am not stuck in one place, but can move forward." *(employee, digital skills training)*

Lacking resources for upskilling

The target group representatives reported facing multiple resource-related barriers that constrained their ability to engage in upskilling and professional development. A key challenge involved limited orientation regarding emerging labour-market demands, as many expressed uncertainties about which competencies were required, which training opportunities would be most beneficial, and how to identify relevant courses. This uncertainty was reinforced by difficulties understanding new occupational categories and rapidly changing job requirements, particularly in digitally oriented sectors. Financial constraints also emerged as a significant obstacle, especially among unemployed individuals or those working in low-paid positions, who reported prioritising basic economic security over investment in training. In addition, lack of time was consistently identified as one of the most substantial barriers to learning. Participants who were employed often struggled to combine training with full-time work commitments and reported exhaustion from prolonged hours spent at computers or in demanding jobs. Others highlighted that caring responsibilities, including the provision of support to older parents or dependent family members, further reduced the time and flexibility available for participation in educational activities. Some respondents also noted practical barriers to accessing training, including limited opportunities to attend courses, even in online formats. Overall, the accounts suggested that older adults' engagement in upskilling was shaped not only by motivation and willingness to learn, but also by structural constraints related to information, financial resources, time availability, and caregiving obligations, which collectively limited their capacity to pursue continuous professional development.

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Social isolation, loneliness

Some of our interlocuters described experiences of social isolation and loneliness as significant challenges associated with later life and labour-market disengagement. They reported that their social networks had gradually diminished due to a range of life-course transitions, including separation from partners, children becoming independent, relocation, unemployment, and the loss of friends and acquaintances. For unemployed individuals in particular, the weakening of professional ties often resulted in reduced contact with former colleagues and a growing sense of social exclusion. Some training participants noted that prolonged periods of working from home or spending extensive time on computers had further limited opportunities for social interaction, contributing to difficulties in adapting to workplace environments and rebuilding professional relationships. Feelings of loneliness were linked to the absence of meaningful social support and a lack of regular communication with others, which affected both emotional well-being and confidence in seeking employment. Some participants perceived training programmes not only as opportunities for skill development but also as important spaces for social connection, mutual encouragement, and moral support. Engagement in such activities was viewed as a mean of improving sociability, restoring a sense of belonging, and reconnecting with broader social communities. Overall, participants' accounts suggested that shrinking social networks and reduced social participation negatively affected their social orientation, self-confidence, and mental well-being, while simultaneously creating additional barriers to labour-market reintegration.

"Yes, the bad thing is that my contacts are small and I simply have no one to talk to... So, I hope that this course will be just as good and that I will also receive, if nothing else, at least moral support for looking for a job. I would like to be among people somehow, not to be that and, and from being among people, there would be some benefit for you and me." *(jobseeker, digital skills training)*

Impaired health

Part of the respondents described impaired health as a significant factor shaping their employment opportunities, work capacity, and engagement in professional development during later life. Many reported experiencing a range of physical and health-related limitations, including reduced mobility, chronic illnesses, disabilities, weakened physical endurance, and the long-term consequences of serious medical conditions. These health challenges often restricted their ability to perform physically demanding jobs, maintain standard working hours, or continue practising their previous occupations under customary working conditions. Several participants explained that health-related needs required workplace accommodations that their occupations cannot accommodate, resulting in job loss, prolonged periods of inactivity, or withdrawal from employment. Ongoing medical treatment, regular examinations, and rehabilitation requirements further constrained their availability for work and job searching. Some respondents also noted that periods of ill health had interrupted their careers for several years, necessitating efforts to acquire new skills or redirect their professional activities. Individuals with officially recognised disabilities reported experiencing additional barriers in recruitment processes, perceiving that employers viewed health conditions and disability status negatively despite their continued ability to work. Overall, participants' accounts suggested that deteriorating health and disability not only reduced functional work capacity but also interacted with labour-market discrimination and insufficient workplace

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accommodations, thereby increasing the risk of exclusion from employment and limiting opportunities for continued labour-market participation.

"The point is that I personally suffered some health problems, and from there things changed. I had actually left on a rather long sick leave; I really had things that I had to do with regard to my health. But there was no way we could continue, to provide me with the necessary conditions according to me, specifically. There is a dynamic in our profession, and unfortunately no one can fight it or avoid it." *(jobseeker, digital skills training)*

I have [a document] from the territorial expert medical commission. I got [a disability] due to stress, because I was overloaded. I've been rejected by employers due to my medical records. This is discrimination. I'm capable of working. But some employers are put off if you have a disability; they refuse to hire you. *(jobseeker, soft skills training)*

Specific abilities to learn

Trainers' accounts suggested that learning capacities were shaped by age-related and general cognitive and psychological characteristics that influenced attention, information processing, and knowledge acquisition. They described a preference for structured and systematic learning approaches, emphasizing the importance of clearly defined tasks, objectives, and learning sequences in supporting engagement and comprehension. Respondents also demonstrated awareness of the need for timely application of newly acquired knowledge, perceiving that intentions not translated into action quickly were likely to lose priority and be forgotten. In addition, they emphasized limitations in the capacity to simultaneously engage with multiple unfamiliar topics, highlighting the importance of focused learning and gradual progression. Overall, their experiences indicated that effective learning in older age was facilitated by structure, repetition, practical application, and manageable cognitive demands.

Diverse individual needs

Trainers' and some participants' evidences also highlighted the diversity and complexity of individual training needs among older adults, reflecting differences in educational background, motivation, life experiences, personal circumstances, and learning orientation. While many needs related directly to employability and skills development, participants also referred to broader factors such as self-confidence, attitudes toward lifelong learning, personal values, social experiences, and psychological well-being. Motivation emerged as a particularly important determinant of successful learning, with respondents distinguishing between individuals who engaged in training out of genuine interest and those who participated primarily due to external pressures. Prior educational attainment and established learning habits were perceived as facilitating continued engagement with training, whereas long periods without formal learning could reduce confidence in one's ability to study effectively. Participants also emphasized the importance of opportunities for communication, exchange of experiences, and mutual learning, valuing training as a space for reflection and social interaction as well as knowledge acquisition. In some cases, previously unrecognized needs emerged during training, including the need for support in coping with experiences of verbal or online violence. Overall, the findings suggested that older adults constituted a highly

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heterogeneous group whose training needs extended beyond skill acquisition and were shaped by a complex interplay of personal, social, educational, and emotional factors.

1.7.2 Individual-level mechanisms

In SofiaLab, the mechanisms in which the interventions realised their impacts in individual level, could be summarised in six main categories. Each category consists of several to dozen specific mechanisms, the great majority of which were applied to both subgroups (jobseekers and employees) and in the two main interventions (soft skills and digital skills training courses) alike.

1.7.2.1. Targeting specific group and precise identification of needs

When specific group is targeted, its needs can be better identified and addressed. As individual perception, when an initiative is especially dedicated to their group, people feel their problems and needs recognized, and themselves valuable for the society. Not only one or another, but a **combination** of crucial obstacles to the labour market inclusion of older jobseekers were identified and addressed, in order to provide solid support. The responses of the interviewed jobseekers and employees suggested that the effectiveness of targeting older jobseekers stemmed from the specific social and labour-market challenges they faced, including age discrimination, rapidly changing skill requirements, limited resources for upskilling, social isolation, health constraints, and reduced confidence in their employability. These interconnected barriers created needs that were often overlooked in generic employment and training programmes. In this context, initiatives specifically designed for people aged 50 and over enabled a more accurate identification of shared needs and challenges, while also providing participants with a sense of recognition and social value. By addressing the combination of structural, social, and psychological obstacles affecting this group, such interventions contributed to improved skills, enhanced self-confidence, stronger peer support networks, better preparedness for job-search processes, and greater motivation to pursue employment or self-employment opportunities.

“I was looking for this type of courses, some activities, even for my free time - workshops, various creative things, and oh my, this one with SofiaLab popped up and intrigued me a lot. To be honest, the title that is for people 50+. I personally believe that people with experience, but who are already moving into another age group, are overlooked in Bulgaria… and when I saw the ad, I immediately thought of it. Okay. Here's some innovation, something atypical. Basically, let them look for the old dogs.” *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills training)*

1.7.2.2. Experienced trainers

The individual-level data evidenced that experienced trainers played a critical role in facilitating learning and engagement among older adults by combining subject expertise with strong pedagogical, interpersonal, and supportive capacities. This mechanism acted in a context where participants possessed highly diverse educational backgrounds, varying levels of digital literacy, and often low confidence resulting from labour-market exclusion or other personal

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challenges. The trainers, who communicated in accessible language, adapted explanations to different knowledge levels, provided individual support, and drew on experiences similar to those of the trainees were able to establish trust and relevance. Their ability to create a respectful, non-judgmental, and well-organised learning environment encouraged active participation, personal sharing, and peer exchange, while ensuring that participants felt valued and their needs were recognised. Experienced trainers were also able to flexibly adapt training content to emerging needs, integrate real-life examples, and balance emotional support with skills development. As a result, participants reported greater confidence, stronger engagement with learning, improved acquisition and retention of knowledge, enhanced satisfaction with the training process, and increased readiness to apply new skills in their job-search and professional development activities.

"First of all, I would put, of course, the teacher. Because with all courses, it's a bit like school, if the teacher is not worth it, nothing happens. As the teacher is, so are the students. Your teachers are, good for you, 10 out of 10. You know how to select them, you clearly work well with them, they feel good in this type of course and maybe that's of great importance for them to do well." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills and digital skills training courses)*

1.7.2.3. Specific training features

A range of training design features enhanced learning outcomes among older adults by aligning educational delivery with their cognitive characteristics, prior learning experiences, and practical needs. This type of mechanisms took place in the context of participants' diverse knowledge levels, mentioned above, limited familiarity with new technologies for the majority of them, and a preference for structured and purposeful learning, that the trainers found as specific characteristic of mature learners. The training programmes were described by the trainees as effective because of their **manageable duration**, the **limited number of new topics**, and the content presented through a **systematic progression** that helped participants maintain concentration and engagement. **Practical exercises, real-life examples**, and opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to employment-related situations (soft skills training courses) increased the perceived relevance and usability of learning, thereby strengthening knowledge retention and confidence. **Beginning from basic concepts** (digital skills training courses) helped establish a common foundation among participants with different levels of prior knowledge, reducing barriers to participation and enabling informed decisions about further learning needs. In addition, the **provision of learning materials for independent use** after training encouraged continued self-directed development beyond the formal course. Collectively, these training features facilitated the acquisition of practical and applicable skills, improved self-confidence, stimulated further learning, and enhanced participants' capacity to conduct more effective job searches and navigate labour-market challenges.

1.7.2.4. Group environment

The group environment appeared as both learning and social tool.

As a learning tool, it: (i) provided opportunity to exchange knowledge and questions within the group; (ii) made visible for the trainees their actual level in the respective field, as they were

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able to compare with peers; (iii) for the same reason, it allowed identification of own strengths and weaknesses and planning one's further development.

As a social tool, the group environment: (i) provided opportunity for instant exchange of information and experiences about the labour market and connected topics; (ii) created a friendly/safe space for sharing; (iii) acted as a support network both ad hoc (during the course) and beyond (after its end).

The group training environment functioned as an important mechanism for enhancing learning, motivation, and psychosocial well-being among older jobseekers. The context factors associated with this mechanism were participants' frequent experiences of labour-market exclusion, low self-confidence, limited knowledge of changing employment requirements, and social isolation. Through interaction with peers facing similar challenges, trainees shared experiences, exchanged information, and collectively made sense of their employment difficulties, which helped them recognise that unsuccessful job-search outcomes were often rooted in structural barriers rather than individual shortcomings. This process reduced feelings of guilt and self-blame, strengthened self-esteem, and fostered a sense of community and belonging. Group discussions, peer learning, collaborative activities, and opportunities to compare experiences enabled participants to acquire new knowledge, identify areas for further development, and learn about labour-market trends from one another. The mutual encouragement and support provided within the group increased motivation to participate, complete training activities, and persist in job-search efforts. In some cases, the relationships established during training developed into longer-term support networks that continued to facilitate personal and professional development. However, the effectiveness of this mechanism depended on active and constructive participation; when engagement was limited, opportunities for peer learning and mutual support were reduced. Overall, the group training environment contributed to improved confidence, enhanced learning outcomes, reduced social isolation, and greater readiness for labour-market participation.

"It is useful because everyone shares their experience of how they looked for a job, what they were told or what they were not told at all. We shared our experiences there, such as what we encountered during interviews and so on. It is very useful to hear first-hand what others have encountered, so you know you are not alone and that everyone faces the same challenges." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills training)*

1.7.2.5. Additional support

Complementary activities

The individual-level analysis found that additional support mechanisms enhanced the effectiveness of training by addressing practical, informational, and social barriers that could otherwise limit participation and learning. Older adults often required more time to process new information, faced technical difficulties in online learning environments, and benefited from connections between training and employment opportunities. Complementary activities, including individual consultations, meetings with employers, job fairs, and networking events, extended learning beyond formal training sessions and provided opportunities for clarification, guidance, and direct labour-market engagement. These forms of support enabled participants to reflect on acquired knowledge, resolve emerging questions, and gain confidence in applying new skills. At the same time, logistical support, such as the provision of digital equipment,

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stable connectivity, training materials, and prompt technical assistance, reduced participation barriers and ensured uninterrupted engagement with the learning process. A welcoming and well-organised learning environment further promoted comfort, motivation, and active involvement. Together, these forms of additional support strengthened participants' sense of being valued and assisted, facilitated successful course completion, improved learning outcomes, and increased readiness to pursue employment and further professional development.

"The technology is up to par, with these large monitors, wherever you sit, whatever you do, you can see everything, you can hear it, the team is wonderful. It ensures, they immediately react in case of technical problems. The fact that you always took care of a light snack upon arrival, coffee and hot tea, a light lunch, is simply an incredible bonus for all of us and an extremely pleasant surprise. I was surprised during the first course, the first lesson. To be honest, sometimes at these types of events, the organizers seem to skip this part, and it's important. Hungry, nervous people who have some physical, material need, are not in the mood to learn and listen to what is being said to them." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills and digital skills training courses)*

1.7.2.6. Initial personal motivation

The individual motivation functioned as a key enabling mechanism influencing engagement with training and subsequent development. The participants either recognised a personal need for change, skill development, or re-employment, or possessed pre-existing interests and goal-oriented attitudes that encouraged learning. Motivated individuals actively participated in training, asked questions, completed assignments, and sought opportunities to extend their knowledge beyond the formal curriculum. Such engagement fostered stronger skill acquisition, greater confidence in their ability to influence their employment prospects, and increased commitment to continued learning and job-search activities. Conversely, lower levels of motivation, often associated with personal circumstances or adverse experiences, limited active participation and reduced the potential benefits of training.

"I have participated in many training courses, so from my previous work experience, I know that desire is required. When a person has desire, things can be achieved." *(interview with jobseeker, soft skills training)*

"Besides two or three people who were really interested in the subject matter that was being taught, there were people who... they didn't know what they were there for." *(interview with employee, digital skills training)*

1.7.3 Summarizing findings along Individual-level CMOs

As a result of the Realist Evaluation work at the individual level, more than 500 CMOs were initially distilled from the available data. At the second stage, CMOs that were semantically different but followed similar logical sequences were aggregated, while those describing causal chains that did not include elements of the interventions were excluded, reducing the total number to approximately 180. At the third stage, the CMOs were classified into groups according to the category of the leading mechanism. At the fourth stage, CMOs containing the

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same mechanisms were further aggregated and reconstructed to contain only one mechanism, regardless of the type and number of contextual factors and outcomes associated with it. For each category of mechanisms, only those CMOs were selected that were repeatedly identified in respondents' evidence, contained the most prominent outcomes, and demonstrated the strongest logical construction. Additionally, priority was given to CMOs describing common elements of the interventions, while topic- and training-specific CMOs were excluded.

1.7.3.1. Targeting specific group and precise identification of needs

1) Age-specific focus strengthened mental well-being and engagement

Mechanism: Initiatives specifically targeting people aged 50+ signalled an understanding of their particular challenges, skills gaps, starting points, and competitive disadvantages, making them more easily trusted and attractive to potential participants. Age-targeted training and social activities also fostered a sense of recognition and value, addressed participants' psychological needs, and encouraged them to engage with new information and opportunities relevant to their age group.

Outcomes: Participants experienced improved mental health, psychological well-being, and self-esteem through feeling recognised, valued, and socially included. They also gained new information and ideas about relevant training and qualification opportunities.

Context facilitators: The increasing labour market activity of people aged 50+ had become more widely recognised by employers and society, while older adults themselves were motivated to remain active, keep up with labour market developments, and compare their skills and opportunities with those of their peers.

Hindering factors: People aged 50+ seeking new employment often felt that their age group was overlooked by society and encountered perceived employer reluctance to recruit older workers, which contributed to feelings of rejection, isolation, and discouragement.

Overarching CMO: If people aged 50+ experienced age-related disadvantage, employer reluctance, social isolation, or discouragement, while remaining motivated to stay active and competitive, **then** initiatives explicitly designed for their age group could foster trust, recognition, and engagement by addressing their specific social, psychological, and skills-related needs. **Because** such targeted provision made participants feel understood, valued, and socially included while responding to their specific circumstances, **as a result**, their mental health, psychological well-being, and self-esteem improved, alongside increased engagement with relevant training and qualification opportunities.

2) Relevant knowledge restored self-confidence and job-seeking motivation

Mechanism: Training in contemporary, labour-market-relevant skills helped participants overcome insecurity by updating their knowledge and exposing them to current trends and perspectives. Tangible evidence of newly acquired competencies strengthened their

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confidence in their abilities and labour-market suitability, while reducing psychological barriers to learning and restoring curiosity and motivation.

Outcomes: Participants updated their knowledge and regained confidence in their value to the labour market, providing initial impetus to seek employment or pursue better job opportunities.

Context facilitators: Labour-market demand for contemporary skills created opportunities for individuals who updated their knowledge and competencies.

Hindering factors: Both employed and unemployed older people experienced insecurity arising from skills gaps or lack of employment. In a rapidly changing environment, their previous experience was not always perceived as relevant, which could generate fears about their ability to acquire new skills; ingrained habits and attitudes could further contribute to diminished confidence and motivation to develop themselves.

Overarching CMO: If older employed or unemployed people experienced insecurity, declining self-confidence, and psychological barriers arising from outdated skills and a dynamic labour market, **then** training in contemporary, labour-market-relevant skills could provide tangible evidence of their capabilities and restore their confidence and motivation to learn. **Because** acquiring relevant knowledge and recognising their renewed competence could reduce psychological barriers and strengthen their perceived labour-market value, **as a result**, participants updated their knowledge, regained curiosity and self-belief, and gained the impetus to seek employment or better job opportunities.

1.7.3.2. Experienced trainers

1) Adaptive trainer expertise supported learning success

Mechanism: The trainer's extensive experience and expertise supported the development and delivery of a well-designed training programme. Experience with diverse audiences enabled the trainer to tailor course content, materials, explanations, and pacing to the specific needs and interests of the group, while attentiveness and an inclusive attitude ensured that individual difficulties and questions were addressed equally. This adaptive and supportive approach fostered trust, engagement, and motivation throughout the learning process.

Outcomes: The training addressed both programme objectives and participants' learning needs, supported successful course completion, and promoted motivation to learn. Participants acquired more consistent and comprehensive knowledge, with fewer unclear or missed topics.

Context facilitators: The trainer had extensive teaching experience in universities and schools and substantial experience working with diverse audiences. The trainee group consisted of older people with varying levels of skills and knowledge, making adaptive teaching particularly relevant.

Hindering factors: Not identified.

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Overarching CMO: If older people with diverse skill levels participated in training delivered by an experienced trainer accustomed to working with diverse audiences, **then** the trainer's expertise, attentiveness, and adaptive teaching practices enabled the content, pace, and explanations to be tailored to individual and group needs. **Because** this responsiveness fostered trust, sustained engagement, and ensured that learning difficulties were addressed, **as a result**, participants were motivated to learn, acquired more consistent and comprehensive knowledge, and successfully completed the course.

2) Inclusive participation restored self-confidence and motivation

Mechanism: The trainers created an inclusive environment that encouraged trainees to express themselves, answer questions, and share their experiences, thereby reducing fears of testing and exposure. By emphasising what participants already knew rather than what they lacked, the trainer provided a secure foundation for further learning and enabled trainees to perceive themselves as active participants in the learning process, strengthening their self-confidence.

Outcomes: Trainees overcame their initial lack of confidence, developed greater self-confidence, and demonstrated increased engagement and motivation in the learning process.

Context facilitators: Trainees had many questions extending beyond the initially announced topics, creating opportunities for active participation and sharing of experiences.

Hindering factors: Many people aged 50+ had not participated in training for a long time and associated training with traditional school-based classroom experiences. They also lacked confidence in their ability to cope with unfamiliar fields requiring a broad range of skills.

Overarching CMO: If people aged 50+ lacked confidence in their ability to learn in unfamiliar fields and associated training with previous classroom experiences, **then** providing an inclusive environment in which everyone could express themselves, answer questions, and share their experiences helped them recognise their existing knowledge and become active participants in the learning process. **Because** this approach shifted attention from knowledge deficits to existing strengths and provided a secure foundation for further learning, **as a result**, trainees regained self-confidence and demonstrated greater engagement and motivation.

3) Trusted professional guidance enhanced learning and labour-market confidence

Mechanism: Direct contact with experienced trainers enabled participants to receive precise, context-specific answers to their questions rather than having to search and filter generic, potentially unsuitable or inaccurate online information. Trainers' professional expertise and, where relevant, first-hand involvement in labour policy provided authoritative and trustworthy information, creating confidence in the knowledge acquired. This guided exposure reduced the effort required to navigate unfamiliar options and provided a credible foundation for further learning.

Outcomes: The learning process became easier and more effective, and participants gained a clearer understanding of how they could benefit from the knowledge acquired. This

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knowledge provided a foundation for further personal and professional development and strengthened participants' confidence in their ability to meet employers' expectations.

Context facilitators: Participants were willing to develop their knowledge in the respective field, while substantial information and learning resources were available online. Trainers' first-hand involvement in the development of relevant labour policies further strengthened their professional expertise.

Hindering factors: Participants were increasingly distrustful and selective regarding potentially false or unreliable online information. Some had previously held high-level digital qualifications but lacked sufficient time to explore new options and applications thoroughly, while others had already spent considerable time trying to identify appropriate ways of working with specific applications.

Overarching CMO: If trainees sought to develop their skills in a context of abundant but potentially unreliable online information, while lacking the time or confidence to identify appropriate solutions, **then** direct guidance from experienced professionals providing authoritative, context-specific information offered a trusted basis for learning. **Because** trainers' professional expertise enabled them to filter information, address individual questions, and provide precise and credible guidance, **as a result**, learning became easier and more effective, trainees gained a secure foundation for further development, and strengthened their confidence in meeting employers' expectations.

CMO specific for digital skills training

4) Accessible explanations fostered confident and independent digital skills use

Mechanism: The trainer communicated calmly, patiently, and respectfully, providing detailed explanations in accessible language and allowing sufficient time for participants to understand and practise each step. They repeated, rephrased, and adjusted the pace and depth of instruction to different skill levels, thereby reducing pressure, confusion, and fear of judgement. Accessible explanations helped bridge the gap between participants' familiarity with digital tools in everyday life and their less familiar professional applications, enabling trainees to internalise new knowledge rather than simply reproduce demonstrated tasks.

Outcomes: Trainees expanded their knowledge and use of digital applications, became less anxious about working with digital tools, and developed greater self-confidence and motivation. They filled basic skills gaps, progressed towards a more consistent level of competence, completed the training more easily, and became better able to perform similar tasks independently without additional support.

Context facilitators: Not identified

Hindering factors: Trainees often had only every-day, rather than professional, experience with digital tools and entered the training with basic, obsolete, or widely varying levels of knowledge and skills. Some participants had limited access to peer support because they

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attended online, while others experienced psychological vulnerability, including reduced confidence and motivation following sudden job loss.

Overarching CMO: If trainees entered training with basic, obsolete, or highly diverse levels of digital skills, limited professional experience with digital tools, and, in some cases, reduced confidence or access to peer support, **then** calm, patient, and detailed explanations in accessible language, combined with sufficient time and responsive pacing, enabled them to understand and internalise unfamiliar concepts. **Because** this approach reduced anxiety, confusion, and fear of falling behind while bridging the gap between every-day and professional use of digital tools, **as a result**, trainees strengthened their self-confidence, developed more consistent digital skills, completed the training more easily, and became more capable of performing similar tasks independently.

1.7.3.3. Specific training features

1) Hybrid training enhanced participation and completion

Mechanism: Hybrid training provided greater flexibility by combining time-saving participation options with opportunities for face-to-face interaction and peer contact. By accommodating different schedules, responsibilities, and practical constraints, the hybrid format reduced the risk of excluding potential trainees and enabled individuals who could benefit from the training to participate through alternative attendance options.

Outcomes: Participants were more likely to attend and successfully complete the training, while the flexible format enabled the intervention to reach and benefit a broader range of people.

Context facilitators: Not identified.

Hindering factors: Potential trainees faced inconvenient training locations, physical disabilities, competing responsibilities, and limited free time, particularly when they were employed.

Overarching CMO: If potential trainees faced limited free time, work responsibilities, or inconvenient training locations, **then** hybrid training provided flexible participation options while preserving opportunities for face-to-face interaction and peer contact. **Because** this flexibility reduced practical barriers and allowed participants to choose formats compatible with their individual circumstances, **as a result**, training was more likely to be successfully attended and completed and could benefit a broader range of participants.

2) Small-group work strengthened skills development

Mechanism: Dividing trainees into small groups according to their skill level helped them relax, engage with the learning process, and assess their motivation to continue. Opportunities to speak and collaborate in small groups or pairs within a familiar environment reduced stress, while practical joint tasks, such as developing business plans, further strengthened motivation and encouraged participants to pursue their ideas.

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Outcomes: Participants gained more equitable opportunities to develop their skills, identify ways of overcoming barriers, and strengthen their capacity to put their ideas and plans into practice.

Context facilitators: The presence of trainees with similar interests created favourable conditions for small-group collaboration and mutual engagement.

Hindering factors: Training groups included participants with diverse attitudes and entry levels of knowledge, while stressful settings and difficulties speaking before an audience constrained active participation.

Overarching CMO: If trainees entered training with diverse levels of knowledge and confidence and experienced stress when speaking before larger groups, **then** working in small groups or pairs, particularly with peers of similar skill levels or interests, created a safer environment for participation and practical collaboration. **Because** this setting reduced anxiety and encouraged trainees to express themselves, practise skills, and develop ideas together, **as a result**, participants gained greater opportunities for skills development and increased motivation and capacity to translate their ideas and working plans into practice.

3) Foundational training enabled independent skills development

Mechanism: The training introduced participants to the existence and functions of unfamiliar tools and concepts. By starting from the most elementary level and progressing step by step through increasingly advanced content, it provided participants with a basic foundation of knowledge and skills on which they could build further.

Outcomes: Participants became able to use their newly acquired knowledge with greater ease and benefit from its practical application. The foundational knowledge also empowered them to seek further information and develop independently, while providing a basis that could be more easily upgraded through subsequent employer-provided training.

Context facilitators: Not identified.

Hindering factors: Some trainees had no prior awareness of the existence or functions of relevant tools and concepts and entered the training as complete beginners, while age-related learning difficulties could slow their progress. In addition, advanced skills were highly sector-specific, limiting the extent to which they could be addressed through general training.

Overarching CMO: If trainees had very limited prior knowledge on the training topics and faced difficulties learning unfamiliar concepts, **then** training that started from the most elementary level and progressed step by step enabled them to build a solid foundation of knowledge and skills. **Because** this gradual approach made unfamiliar concepts accessible and provided a basis for further development, **as a result**, trainees used their newly acquired knowledge with greater ease, independently sought further information, and developed skills that could subsequently be upgraded by employers.

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1.7.3.4. Group environment

1) Peer experience exchange reduced self-blame and restored self-confidence

Mechanism: Group training enabled participants to exchange experiences and perspectives with peers, learn from different responses to similar challenges, and provide mutual social and emotional support. This exchange encouraged participants to reflect on their own circumstances, communicate more openly, and recognise alternative ways of addressing their difficulties.

Outcomes: Participants gained courage, improved their social orientation and skills, and experienced better psychological well-being and self-confidence. They gradually became more comfortable expressing themselves and their aspirations and regained motivation to learn, seek employment, and present themselves more confidently.

Context facilitators: The training group included peers who faced similar labour market challenges, experiences of isolation, and barriers to employment, while also bringing diverse experiences, perspectives, and coping strategies. This combination of shared circumstances and diverse responses created favourable conditions for identification, mutual understanding, and meaningful experience exchange.

Hindering factors: Some older people had lost social contacts and experienced isolation, depression, or discouragement. Others had repeatedly attempted to improve their situation without success, contributing to self-blame, worry, diminished confidence and motivation, and, in some cases, difficulty articulating their goals and aspirations.

Overarching CMO: If older people experienced isolation, discouragement, and loss of confidence after unsuccessful attempts to improve their situation, **then** exchanging experiences with peers facing similar challenges enabled mutual identification and learning from different responses to shared difficulties. **Because** recognising similar experiences in others normalised participants' circumstances and reduced self-blame by demonstrating that their difficulties reflected broader barriers rather than personal failure, **as a result**, participants regained self-confidence and motivation, improved their psychological well-being and social orientation, and became better able to articulate and pursue their learning and employment goals.

2) Peer information exchange and connections built partnerships, networks, and job prospects

Mechanism: Group training enabled participants to exchange ideas, information, and experiences, provide positive feedback, and offer mutual psychological and practical support. This interaction fostered a sense of community and trust, encouraged participants to explore potential professional partnerships, and facilitated the development of longer-term connections through which information and opportunities could continue to be exchanged.

Outcomes: Peer exchange enhanced participants' training experience and motivation for further development. The relationships established during training provided opportunities for

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continued mutual support, professional collaboration, and access to information about new employment opportunities, thereby increasing participants' prospects of finding work.

Context facilitators: Participants faced similar labour market challenges, while shared professional backgrounds or interests facilitated meaningful exchange and potential collaboration. The dynamic labour market, characterised by continuously emerging actors and opportunities, increased the potential value of new professional connections and information exchange.

Hindering factors: Some participants pursuing business or self-employment opportunities lacked support from their families. Previous experience of teamwork also varied, potentially influencing participants' readiness to recognise and engage with the benefits of peer collaboration.

Overarching CMO: If people facing similar labour market challenges participated together in training, particularly where shared professional interests facilitated connection, **then** exchanging ideas, information, and experiences with peers fostered mutual support, trust, and lasting professional relationships. **Because** these exchanges provided new perspectives, strengthened motivation, and created networks through which opportunities and resources could continue to circulate, **as a result**, participants were encouraged to pursue further development, support one another beyond the training, and increase their opportunities for employment or professional collaboration.

3) Peer learning strengthened knowledge and self-confidence

Mechanism: Peer learning enabled participants to learn through one another's questions, experiences, viewpoints, and feedback. Mutual support reduced fears of asking elementary questions, while comparison with peers' knowledge levels reinforced learning and motivation.

Outcomes: Participants filled knowledge gaps, strengthened their self-confidence, and progressed more effectively towards the training goals, gaining knowledge and skills applicable to their future development.

Context facilitators: Participants shared a common need for employment and willingness to learn. Familiar people and settings further supported comfortable peer interaction.

Hindering factors: Unfamiliar people and settings could initially inhibit participation, while differences in knowledge levels could make less-skilled participants reluctant to ask questions.

Overarching CMO: If participants with shared employment needs entered training with different knowledge levels and some hesitated to ask questions, **then** peer learning through shared questions, experiences, and mutual support helped them clarify uncertainties and learn from one another. **Because** observing peers normalised knowledge gaps and reduced fear of appearing uninformed, **as a result**, participants strengthened their knowledge and self-confidence and progressed more effectively towards the training goals.

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1.7.3.5. Additional support

1) Additional information enabled independent development

Mechanism: Providing trainees with additional information, links to relevant online training, and information about free courses enabled them to build on their existing knowledge and become more confident in finding further information and support independently.

Outcomes: Participants became more motivated to seek information independently, more confident in their work or job search, and better able to decide whether and how to continue their development. Access to further learning opportunities also supported their qualification and labour-market competitiveness.

Context facilitators: Participants were interested in additional types of training beyond the topics already covered.

Hindering factors: No individual or training programme could cover all relevant knowledge and topics. Limited or absent income further restricted access to paid qualification courses.

Overarching CMO: If trainees were interested in further learning but faced knowledge gaps and financial barriers to additional training, **then** providing information, links, and access to relevant free learning resources enabled them to build on their existing knowledge. **Because** knowing where and how to access further support increased their confidence and capacity to continue learning independently, **as a result**, participants became more motivated to seek information, make informed development choices, and improve their qualifications and labour-market competitiveness.

2) Comprehensive practical support enabled effective learning

Mechanism: Comprehensive practical support addressed different barriers to participation: refreshments helped satisfy basic needs and reduce tension, well-prepared organisers provided timely solutions, and technical assistance prevented trainees from missing training content.

Outcomes: Trainees were better able to concentrate, follow the course fully, and engage more effectively in the learning process.

Context facilitators: Not identified.

Hindering factors: Many older participants had limited technical and digital skills, while some experienced psychological pressure or unmet basic needs that could hinder their concentration and participation.

Overarching CMO: If older trainees experienced psychological pressure, unmet basic needs, or limited technical and digital skills, **then** comprehensive practical support, including refreshments, responsive organisation, and technical assistance, reduced distractions and prevented participants from missing training content. **Because** these forms of support reduced

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tension and practical barriers to participation, **as a result**, trainees were better able to concentrate, follow the course fully, and learn more effectively.

1.7.3.6. Initial personal motivation

1) Health conditions constrained job search and required requalification

Mechanism: Serious health conditions that were incompatible with the requirements of participants' previous jobs shifted their priorities towards medical examinations and treatment. At the same time, health-related work limitations required them to consider requalification and assess job vacancies more carefully to identify suitable employment.

Outcomes: Participants were compelled to consider requalification towards occupations compatible with their health conditions. Their job-search activity slowed substantially or temporarily ceased, and they applied for fewer positions.

Context facilitators: Not identified.

Hindering factors: Participants had worked in high-demand and stressful occupations involving physical requirements, while serious or recurring health conditions reduced their capacity to continue in these roles and created a need for requalification.

Overarching CMO: If individuals developed serious health conditions that were incompatible with the physical or psychological demands of their previous occupation, **then** they prioritised medical examinations and treatment while needing to consider requalification and more carefully assess suitable job opportunities. **Because** their health restricted the range of appropriate jobs and diverted time and resources from job search towards treatment and requalification, **as a result**, job-search activity slowed substantially or temporarily ceased, with fewer applications submitted and a need to transition towards more health-compatible occupations.

2) Internal motivation sustained learning and development

Mechanism: Internal motivation and persistence encouraged older jobseekers not to give up when facing barriers but to invest their time in reading, learning, and developing their knowledge. A strong willingness to learn and work hard helped them preserve their self-confidence and continue seeking ways to move forward.

Outcomes: Participants expanded their knowledge and demonstrated their competence to others. Their continued engagement in learning helped them cope with difficulties, avoid discouragement and loss of motivation, and increased their likelihood of participating in planned interventions and pursuing further development.

Context facilitators: A strong desire for personal and professional development supported internal motivation. Higher levels of education and qualification, together with an established disposition towards learning, further facilitated continued learning and development.

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Hindering factors: Unemployment, difficulties in finding work, and repeated job-search failures created substantial psychological pressure for older people. In addition, not everyone had a strong learning orientation, and some people aged 50+ had not actively exercised their learning skills for many years.

Overarching CMO: If older jobseekers experienced unemployment, repeated setbacks, and psychological strain but retained a strong desire to develop, **then** internal motivation and persistence encouraged them to continue learning, maintain self-confidence, and actively seek ways forward. **Because** sustained learning and persistence helped them cope with difficulties and resist discouragement, **as a result**, they expanded their knowledge, maintained motivation, and were more likely to engage in interventions and pursue further development.

1.7.4. Overarching CMO at individual-level

Responsive and supportive training transforms perceived vulnerability into perceived capability

Mechanism: When training was responsive, supportive, and socially inclusive, through age-relevant content, experienced and adaptive trainers, accessible delivery, peer interaction, and practical support, participants experienced greater psychological safety, social connection, and normalisation. They came to perceive themselves as valuable and capable again and the training goals as feasible.

Outcomes: Participants regained self-confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy; successfully participated in and completed training; acquired and independently applied relevant knowledge and skills; improved their mental wellbeing and social connectedness; and increased their employment prospects and capacity for career development, continued employment, or self-employment.

Context facilitators: Willingness to learn, shared challenges and interests, and prior experience provided resources upon which training courses could build. Demand for new skills and financial needs served as additional incentives.

Hindering factors: Older people experienced discrimination, isolation, and discouragement; labour-market pressures and changing or unclear demands; skills gaps and outdated knowledge; low self-confidence and motivation; constraints related to time, location, disability, and finances; and limited access to support.

Overarching CMO: If people aged 50+ face discriminatory attitudes, changing labour-market demands, skills gaps, low self-confidence and motivation, isolation or discouragement, limited access to support, and psychosocial and practical barriers to learning and labour-market participation, but have a need or willingness to learn and develop, **then** age- and needs-relevant, accessible training is provided, incorporating tailored content, adaptive and trusted guidance, supportive peer interaction, and appropriate practical support. **Because** these resources enable participants to perceive learning as relevant, achievable, trustworthy, inclusive, and worthwhile, and to perceive themselves as valuable and capable, **as a result**, they regain confidence and motivation, acquire and independently apply new knowledge and skills, strengthen their psychological wellbeing and social capabilities, and improve their labour-market prospects and opportunities for further development.

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The summary of the most important facilitating and hindering context factors, intervention mechanisms and perceived outcomes is illustrated by Figure 3 below.

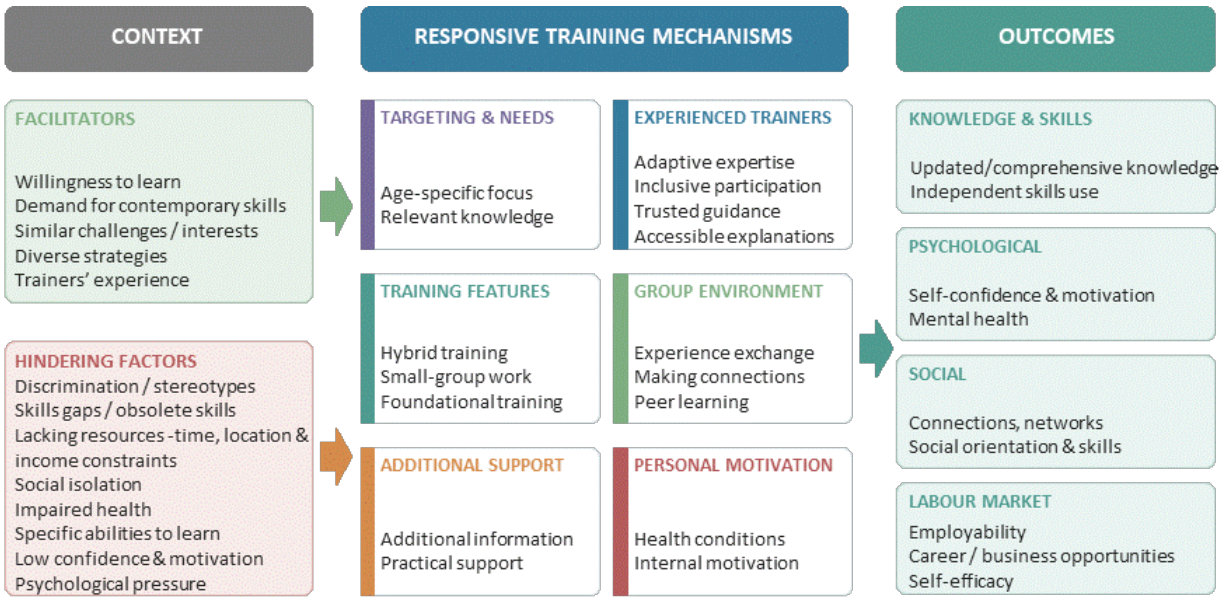

Figure 3: Context factors, mechanisms and outcomes in SofiaLab

1.8 Overarching findings quantitative and qualitative analyses

1.8.1. Reflecting on the quantitative and qualitative results

The qualitative data gathered through the Realist Evaluation at the individual level **confirmed** some of the conclusions derived from the quantitative data. For instance, during the in-depth interviews, our interlocutors identified the new knowledge they had acquired as one of the major benefits of the intervention they had undergone. At the same time, the quantitative analysis demonstrated statistically significant differences in living-lab-specific skills both between the pre- and post-training measurements for the treatment group and between the treatment and control groups four months after the training. Respondents to the short questionnaire, including both jobseekers and employees, also placed considerable emphasis on skills acquisition as a specific benefit of the intervention.

However, the majority of the findings from the Realist Evaluation at the individual level **contradicted** the conclusions derived from the quantitative analysis. Moreover, the quantitative data from the main surveys differed from those obtained through the short-questionnaire survey. The main survey data did not demonstrate changes in participants' motivation and self-efficacy, whereas respondents to the short questionnaire highlighted improved self-confidence as the second most important benefit of the intervention, and evidence from the in-depth interviews pointed to increased motivation and self-confidence as the most prominent and frequently reported outcomes. According to the quantitative findings, participants' mental health did not change significantly between the measurement points;

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however, a large proportion of the free-form conversations included reports of various mental health benefits.

The research observations and overall analysis suggested three possible types of explanation for these divergent results, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive:
Realist Evaluation interviews attracted the most satisfied and enthusiastic participants. As a general rule, voluntary and non-incentivised participation in research activities, particularly qualitative research, tends to attract the most active individuals. In the context of beneficiary feedback, it is usually the most satisfied and/or the most dissatisfied individuals who respond. In the case of the interventions conducted in SofiaLab, despite some recommendations provided by the trainees who agreed to participate in in-depth interviews, their overall feedback was highly positive. This circumstance provides grounds for the hypothesis that the identified contradictions between the outcomes of the quantitative and qualitative components of the survey may be attributable to differences in the levels of intervention effects, and consequently in satisfaction levels, among the participants covered by the two methodologies. The relatively small numbers of employees and jobseekers who participated in at least two measurement points may also have prevented the quantitative analysis from demonstrating the results that emerged from the Realist Evaluation.

Some broader socio-economic factors are more powerful than the intervention effects. As discussed in the analysis of the quantitative results, the anticipated economic challenges associated with the adoption of the euro may have had a negative impact on the mental health of vulnerable groups, potentially nullifying the effects of the intervention. Similarly, the strength of perceived age-based discrimination and expectations of a worsening economic situation may have been considerably more powerful than participants' sense of increased personal capacities and, consequently, may have resulted in negative assessments of self-efficacy.

The comparative quantitative methodology does not encompass the potential effects of living-lab-specific intervention activities. The only statistically significant results from the quantitative survey concerned improved self-assessments of knowledge in topics covered by the training activities, which may lead to the conclusion that the most important intervention results are those specific to the living lab. This provides grounds for stating that the Realist Evaluation data **complemented** the quantitative data. The most prominent example is the reported effect of the interventions on older workers' social skills, labour-market orientation, and broader social orientation, as well as on the development of supportive social networks that may improve their prospects for personal development, employment, and self-employment in the long term.

As the two target subgroups underwent equal interventions, the answers of the research questions cannot be fully separated for the employees and jobseekers, moreover that many of the employees felt their jobs insecure and experienced similar psychological effects as the jobseekers. Still, some of the intervention effects are more relevant to one of the subgroups. For vulnerable employees, the main mechanisms were **perceived relevance, renewed sense of self-efficacy, trusted guidance and accessible learning**. Updating labour-market-relevant skills provided evidence that older employees could continue to learn and adapt, strengthening confidence in their professional value. Adaptive trainers, inclusive participation, peer learning and step-by-step instruction made learning more achievable, while hybrid

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provision reduced barriers related to work, time, location or disability. These mechanisms were facilitated by participants' motivation to learn, supportive learning environments and labour-market demand for the skills acquired. They were constrained by age discrimination, outdated skills, low confidence, health limitations, and practical or financial barriers. Outcomes included greater confidence and motivation, updated skills, successful training completion and increased capacity for independent development. Together, these strengthened participants' **continued employability and potential for career development or better employment**, although direct upward mobility was not clearly demonstrated.

For vulnerable jobseekers, the interventions additionally functioned as a process of **psychological and labour-market reactivation**. Successful learning restored self-confidence and perceived employability, while interaction with peers facing similar difficulties reduced isolation and self-blame. Peer relationships also created supportive networks through which information, employment opportunities and possibilities for collaboration could emerge. Trusted trainers helped participants navigate complex information and identify relevant learning and development opportunities. These mechanisms were facilitated by participants' willingness to learn and work, the relevance of training to employment opportunities, and access to supportive trainers, peers and further learning. They were constrained by repeated job-search failures, discrimination, financial difficulties, outdated skills, low confidence and health problems. Outcomes included renewed job-search motivation, improved skills and self-confidence, stronger networks and greater capacity to pursue **employment, requalification or self-employment**.

Across employees and jobseekers, training worked most effectively when it addressed **skills gaps together with the psychological, social and practical consequences of labour-market vulnerability**. Age- and needs-relevant training, experienced and adaptive trainers, accessible teaching, peer interaction, flexible delivery and practical support created trust, recognition and psychological safety. These conditions reduced anxiety and self-doubt and strengthened participants' confidence, motivation, self-efficacy and willingness to continue learning. Where older employees and jobseekers had experienced disadvantage, declining confidence, skills gaps or isolation but retained a willingness to develop, responsive and supportive training made learning feel **relevant, achievable and worthwhile**. This enabled participants to perceive themselves as capable of learning and adapting, acquire and independently apply new skills, and engage more confidently with labour-market opportunities. Subsequently, their capacity for **continued employment, career development, labour-market (re)entry and self-employment increased**. However, the translation of these capacities into actual employment or upward mobility remained dependent on wider circumstances, including broader economic situation, available jobs, labour-market demand employer behaviour, and personal health.

1.8.2. Impact of the coalition on individual-level initiatives

The coalition influenced individual-level outcomes primarily **indirectly, by shaping the accessibility, relevance and quality of the interventions through which self-efficacy and skilled behaviour developed**. Its most important contribution was the co-design of an age-sensitive intervention that combined research-based knowledge with partners' practical experience of vulnerable groups. Mutual trust and complementary expertise supported the

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development of training that responded to barriers experienced by people aged 50+, including outdated skills, low confidence, limited knowledge of development opportunities, financial constraints and apprehension about learning. Free access, accessible training design, practical examples and peer-based learning subsequently reduced barriers to participation and helped participants perceive learning as achievable.

At the individual level, these coalition-enabled intervention characteristics activated **self-efficacy as a central mechanism connecting participation with behavioural change**. Participants' exposure to relevant training, achievable learning tasks and examples of peers facing comparable difficulties provided evidence that they remained capable of learning and adapting. This was particularly important where older workers had previously perceived their knowledge as outdated or had experienced declining confidence following unemployment or labour-market difficulties. The intervention consequently supported changes from uncertainty about one's abilities towards greater confidence, motivation and willingness to continue learning. The quality of the training appeared to reinforce this process, as satisfied participants voluntarily enrolled in subsequent courses and word-of-mouth became an additional recruitment mechanism. Thus, self-efficacy was reflected behaviourally in **continued engagement in learning and greater readiness for further development**.

The coalition also contributed to changes in **skilled behaviour** by prioritising digital, green and particularly soft skills. Practical, situation-based soft-skills training allowed participants to apply learning to job-search and workplace situations, strengthening their capacity to manage interviews, professional relationships and teamwork. General skills training therefore increased participants' knowledge and confidence and better prepared both employees and jobseekers for labour-market interactions. The coalition's intervention design supported a progression from **accessible learning, through improved skills and strengthened self-efficacy, towards more confident application of skills and continued learning behaviour**.

However, the evidence also demonstrated an important boundary to this individual-level pathway. Improvements in self-efficacy and general skilled behaviour did **not necessarily translate into employment or upward mobility**. Employers frequently required specific professional, particularly technical, qualifications that were not provided by the intervention. Differences between participants' professional backgrounds, available vacancies and acceptable working conditions further weakened the match between improved individual capabilities and employment opportunities. Thus, participants could become more confident, motivated and skilled while remaining unable to meet the formal requirements of available vacancies. The findings therefore distinguished between **enhanced individual capability and realised labour-market mobility**.

This distinction was particularly evident for employees. The coalition did not establish a direct connection between training participation and internal promotion, and no identifiable upward or sideward mobility resulted from the intervention. Employers faced organisational and economic barriers to internal mobility, including difficulties replacing promoted workers, limited internal career structures and the costs of requalification. The coalition consequently separated employee development from employer engagement. This adaptation enabled older employees who participated independently to strengthen their capabilities without making their

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development conditional upon their employers' willingness or capacity to promote them. Although this approach did not generate internal mobility, it **preserved the individual-level pathway towards greater career readiness**, while employer-focused activities separately encouraged more inclusive attitudes towards older workers.

The coalition's impact was also constrained by its uneven capacity to mobilise the wider institutional environment. When employers and the employment agency did not generate the anticipated participant inflow, the core coalition successfully used its own networks, social media and job-search channels. This secured participation and enabled individuals to benefit from the interventions, but it also meant that participation was predominantly **individually driven rather than embedded in employer or institutional pathways**. Similarly, the coalition's targeted engagement had potential to challenge employers' stereotypes about workers aged 50+, but the limited scale and duration of the initiative restricted the extent to which such changes could create opportunities corresponding to participants' enhanced capabilities.

Overall, the coalition appeared to have exerted its strongest influence at the **intervention-to-individual interface**, rather than directly producing employment transitions or career mobility. Coalition-based co-design and implementation created accessible, relevant and supportive learning opportunities that reduced barriers, generated sense of capacity and strengthened participants' self-efficacy. Increased self-efficacy, in turn, supported motivation, continued learning and more confident application of newly acquired digital, soft and other general skills. The emerging causal pathway could therefore be summarised in Figure 4:

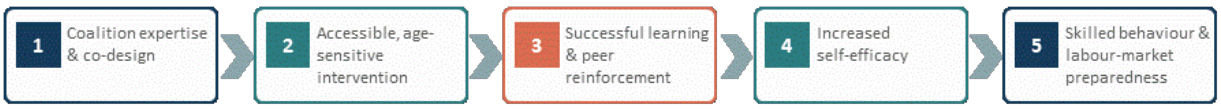

Figure 4: Pathway from coalition to individual level

However, the final transition from **improved capability to realised mobility** depended on factors largely outside the individual training intervention, particularly occupational qualifications, vacancy characteristics, employers' recruitment and promotion practices, and the fit between labour supply and demand. The coalition therefore appeared more successful in **strengthening the agency, self-efficacy and skilled behaviour of people aged 50+ than in converting these individual changes into immediate employment or mobility outcomes**. This suggested that future coalition-based approaches would need to connect effective individual-level capability development more closely with professional requalification and concrete employer demand if improvements in self-efficacy and skilled behaviour were to result consistently in labour-market inflow or upward mobility.

1.8.3. The ENGINE approach

Coalition building

Coalition building was **implemented, but only partially achieved in the form envisaged by ENGINE**. A cross-sector coalition was established, involving NGOs, employers, HR organisations, training providers, municipal actors, and national institutions. In practice,

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however, implementation relied primarily on a **small core coalition**, while the wider membership participated more selectively. Trust-based relationships, pre-existing cooperation, flexible leadership, and a shared commitment to improving employment opportunities for people aged 50+ enabled the formation and functioning of this core group. By contrast, **broad and sustained stakeholder participation was not fully achieved**. Public institutions often provided legitimacy and symbolic support rather than operational involvement, while employer participation remained scarce. The coalition also lacked clearly defined and binding responsibilities, which reduced accountability and made continued participation dependent on voluntary commitment and the coordinating efforts of the lead organisation. Most importantly, the ENGINE ambition to use the coalition as a vehicle for **structural or policy-level change was not realised**. Bulgaria's highly centralised employment governance left limited scope for city-level policy influence, while prolonged political instability further reduced institutional willingness to make longer-term commitments. Consequently, ENGINE was implemented in SofiaLab primarily as a **flexible local network for intervention delivery, knowledge exchange, awareness raising, and relationship building**, rather than as an institutionalised coalition capable of influencing employment policy. The experience therefore suggested that ENGINE's coalition-building component was feasible at the local operational level, but its broader institutionalisation required longer-term relationship building, clearer partner responsibilities, stronger employer incentives, and more sustained involvement of national-level policy actors. For developing **self-efficacy and mobility**, the most important characteristic of the ENGINE coalition appeared to have been its capacity to connect vulnerable participants with employers, trainers, HR professionals and other supportive actors, thereby expanding networks, confidence and awareness of employment opportunities. However, the Bulgarian context showed that a broad multi-stakeholder coalition was **not in itself sufficient**: trust-based relationships and active involvement of a small core of partners mattered more than formal or symbolic membership, particularly in a centralised and institutionally unstable environment.

Multi-level intervention package

The multi-level intervention package was **implemented most strongly at the individual level, partially at the organisational level, and hardly at the institutional or policy level**. At the individual level, ENGINE provided digital and soft-skills training, personal development support, employability activities, and contact with employers. The ENGINE emphasis on combining **skills development, personal support and direct interaction with employers** appeared particularly important for strengthening self-efficacy, as participants required not only updated competencies but also greater confidence in recognising, presenting and applying their existing experience to new employment opportunities. At the same time, increased mobility depended on the context: without corresponding employer demand, recognised qualifications and opportunities for occupational mobility, improvements at the individual level could not automatically translate into employment or career transitions. At the organisational level, employers contributed to training, mock interviews, meetings with participants, curriculum discussions, and employment-related activities. However, **more substantial changes in employer practices were not systematically achieved**. Employer demand frequently concerned technical and vocational qualifications rather than the transferable skills primarily offered through ENGINE, while NGO-issued training certificates lacked the recognition of state-certified qualifications. Some employers also had limited incentives to invest in older domestic workers when alternative recruitment channels, including

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third-country recruitment, were available. The **institutional and policy level of the package remained least developed**. Although public institutions participated in the coalition and the intervention increased visibility of the challenges faced by people aged 50+, this did not translate into significant changes in employment programmes or policies. Centralised governance, political instability, institutional capacity constraints, and the existence of established state programmes restricted the space for such change. Thus, ENGINE operated in SofiaLab predominantly as an **individual-plus-organisational intervention**, while the intended connection between individual empowerment, organisational change, and systemic policy transformation remained incomplete.

Co-design and co-implementation

Co-design and co-implementation were **implemented as adaptive practices, but participation in these processes was uneven**. The intervention was not delivered as a completely fixed package. The participants enrolled in different intervention elements upon their current needs and availability. Training content and activities were progressively adapted through exchanges among the lead organisation, trainers, employers, HR actors, and other coalition members. Employer feedback informed discussions about labour-market needs, while trainers and implementation partners adapted activities to participants' needs, including digital skills, communication, personal development, and contact with employers. The coalition's informal governance structure supported this flexibility and enabled relatively rapid adjustments during implementation. Co-implementation was also visible in partners' practical contributions to training sessions, mock interviews, employer meetings, recruitment contacts, events, and dissemination. The **adaptive and participatory character of ENGINE** was important for self-efficacy and mobility because it allowed interventions to respond to the actual barriers experienced by people aged 50+ and to incorporate employer perspectives on changing labour-market requirements. However, the Sofia experience suggested that extensive co-design by all coalition members was less important than **continuous feedback from those directly involved**, since diverse stakeholder capacities, limited employer engagement and rapidly changing labour-market conditions made focused and iterative adaptation more feasible than comprehensive shared decision-making. **Full and continuous co-ownership across the coalition was not achieved**. Co-design remained concentrated among the core partners, while members of the wider coalition often participated only in specific activities or followed implementation from a distance. Communication with the entire coalition was not sufficiently frequent to maintain a strong sense of shared ownership, and evaluation feedback was considered too slow to inform implementation in real time. Moreover, transnational learning remained limited, reducing opportunities to adapt ENGINE through direct exchange between Living Labs. The experience of SofiaLab therefore indicated that co-design and co-implementation had functioned effectively as **pragmatic mechanisms for adapting intervention delivery** but had not developed into comprehensive shared decision-making across all stakeholders. More regular feedback loops, systematic employer and beneficiary involvement, clearer opportunities for partner contribution, and faster transfer of evaluation findings would have been required to implement this dimension of ENGINE more fully.

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1.8.4. Maintenance and sustainability of the coalition

The sustainability of the coalition depended less on maintaining the project in its original form and more on whether **relationships, knowledge, practices, and mechanisms developed through the collaboration could continue beyond formal project implementation**. The coalition had established a foundation for such continuity through previous collaboration, regular communication, mutual trust, and complementary expertise. These relationships facilitated knowledge exchange and enabled partners to combine research evidence with practical experience of vulnerable groups. Consequently, an important sustainable outcome was the accumulated **shared knowledge and experience of designing age-sensitive labour-market interventions**, which could inform partners' subsequent activities independently of the continuation of the formal coalition.

At the same time, the findings indicated that coalition maintenance would have required continued investment in **relationship management and coordination**. Partner engagement had remained uneven because the target group and intervention objectives aligned differently with individual organisations' missions and interests. The lead organisation had invested substantial, partly unbudgeted effort in maintaining participation and demonstrating the mutual benefits of collaboration. Although this had enabled a broader intervention than a single organisation could probably have delivered, it had not eliminated disagreements concerning intervention design or generated equal ownership among coalition members. The sustainability of the coalition as an active structure had therefore remained vulnerable to the withdrawal of dedicated coordination resources after project completion.
The intervention had nevertheless initiated processes that had potential to persist beyond the project's formal duration. First, the coalition had strengthened **awareness of the labour-market potential and development needs of people aged 50+** among participating organisations and employers. The targeted approach had provided concrete opportunities to question stereotypes concerning older workers and had exposed employers to inclusive employment practices. Even where immediate recruitment or internal mobility had not occurred, these experiences had created a basis upon which more inclusive employer attitudes and practices could subsequently develop.

Second, the coalition had strengthened **individual learning and development processes** that were not inherently dependent on continued project support. Free, accessible and age-sensitive training had increased participants' knowledge, self-confidence and motivation, while information about further learning opportunities had encouraged continued skills development. Participants' voluntary enrolment in subsequent training suggested that successful intervention experiences had generated continued learning behaviour. Peer relationships and informal word-of-mouth had additionally provided mechanisms through which information, confidence in the intervention, and opportunities for participation could continue to circulate.
However, sustainability had been constrained by the limited duration and scale of the initiative. The project had not operated long enough to establish broad employer trust or fully institutionalise pathways connecting training with recruitment and internal mobility. Furthermore, delayed evaluation results had restricted evidence-informed adaptation during implementation, reducing opportunities to identify and consolidate the most effective approaches before project completion. The absence of strong employer and Employment Agency pipelines also meant that participant recruitment had remained dependent largely on

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the core coalition's networks and individual initiative rather than becoming embedded within existing institutional systems.

Overall, the evidence suggested that the **most sustainable legacy lay in the capacities and processes generated by the coalition rather than in the maintenance of the coalition as an unchanged organisational structure**. These included trusted inter-organisational relationships, accumulated expertise in age-sensitive intervention design, greater awareness of older workers' capabilities, accessible training practices, enhanced individual self-efficacy and continued learning behaviour, and informal networks for outreach and information exchange. Longer-term sustainability, however, would have required continued coordination, stronger institutional and employer ownership, more systematic evidence for adaptation, and integration of these practices into organisations' routine activities. Continued dissemination of successful participant and employer experiences could also have supported this process by reinforcing credibility and gradually expanding trust and participation beyond the original project.

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SYNCLUSIVE

Funded by the European Union

Living Lab Report

Kokkola, Finland

Appendix 2 to D2.1 Realist Evaluation



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1.Living Lab: Finland

1.1 Building a Coalition

In the Finnish Living Lab (Kokkola), a network focusing on employment reform already existed before the SYNCLUSIVE project. However, the network operated in a relatively unsystematic manner, with issues often addressed through bilateral contacts on a case-by-case basis. The stakeholders were familiar with one another, and a strong foundation of mutual trust existed between them. This provided a solid starting point for forming the coalition. New stakeholders were invited, and collaboration was promoted through information-gathering and activation events organised by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) and the employment services of City of Kokkola.
Between 2023 and 2025, four major coalition gatherings were held. These demonstrated strong interest in maintaining engagement, with around 10–12 stakeholders involved. However, activities between stakeholders remained largely bilateral, and some participants were primarily engaged in direct operational work rather than representing their organisations at a managerial level.
In the end of 2025, FIOH launched a renewed activation phase with a broader focus on regional vitality, including employment. The aim was to better engage employers. The employment services took a clearer leadership role and FIOH facilitated. A successful employment ecosystem from North Karelia was presented as a benchmark. Coalition strengthening proceeded through a series of workshops: first, defining mission, vision, objectives, value proposition, roles and commitment; second, identifying joint activities and establishing four thematic working groups (employment, employment of vulnerable groups, continuous learning, and internationalisation); and third, agreeing on group composition, chairs, and next steps. New stakeholders joined throughout. The stakeholders also agreed to develop a written coalition agreement to strengthen credibility and organisational commitment. This agreement is currently under preparation, and working groups are expected to begin in autumn 2026, with progress to be reviewed in September 2026.
Overall, the coalition aims to move beyond traditional bilateral cooperation towards more multilateral collaboration in addressing complex challenges.

Representatives of the following stakeholder organisations participated in the coalition's activities:

- Employment services of City of Kokkola
- Business services of City of Kokkola
- Training institutions: University of Applied Sciences (Centria), The Federation of Education in Central Ostrobothnia (Kpedu), Vocational College (Luovi), Kokkola adult education centre
- Third sector organisations: The Finnish Red Cross, Kokkola Association of the Unemployed, Mello=an association providing social services
- Wellbeing Services County of Central Ostrobothnia (Soite)
- Associations of local and Central Ostrobothnia entrepreneurs
- Some bigger and smaller employers
- Some representatives of trade unions

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1.2 The target group

The main target group of the Finnish Living Lab is long-term unemployed jobseekers, defined in Finland as individuals who have been unemployed for at least 12 months. This group is highly heterogeneous; many face health and work ability challenges, have outdated or insufficient education, low self-confidence due to prolonged unemployment, an immigrant background, live in rural areas, and are either young or older (Farchy & Immervoll, 2021).
At the start of the project, there were approximately 650 long-term unemployed individuals in Kokkola, and the unemployment rate was 8.4%. Due to the economic downturn in Finland, the number has risen in Kokkola to 9.7% (April 2026). In 2026, Finland has the highest unemployment rate in Europe (11.6%, April 2026, Official Statistics of Finland).
Two different interventions were targeted at **jobseekers**. First, a peer group-based Taite coaching was aimed at those unemployed who have been unemployed for over a year but have great potential and motivation to gain employment and generally do not face severe health challenges. Second, IPS (individual placement and support) coaching was targeted those facing more significant barriers to employment, requiring more personalised support from job coaches for both them and their possible employers.
The City of Kokkola, as a large employer, is interested in exploring ways to support **employees** in vulnerable labour market positions (e.g., those with lower educational levels). Although the organisation offered various programmes for employee skill development, there was no structured guidance for **supervisors** on supporting competence and career development within their teams. To address this gap, the supervisory coaching programme Guiding Skills and Development was developed through collaboration between FIOH and the City of Kokkola's HR Department. The training was offered to voluntary supervisors to maximise reach and build consistent leadership capabilities across units. Participants came from several sectors, including early childhood education, comprehensive school education, technical and environmental services, cultural services, cleaning and catering, and human resources.

1.3 From drivers and barriers to solutions

At the individual level, the main obstacles of **jobseekers** relate to prolonged unemployment, low professional skills, and impaired health. Individuals who have been unemployed for a long time are not necessarily aware of current labour market demands, and many have lost self-efficacy and motivation to seek employment. At the employer level, the main challenges are linked to the structure of the regional economy: 83% of companies are micro-enterprises with fewer than six employees. These SMEs have limited opportunities for career development, mobility, or new recruitment, and employers are concerned about the costs of sickness absence. They often lack the resources to onboard employees or support the skills development of those who have been unemployed long-term and therefore call for employment subsidies and job coaching support. At the service level, there is fragmentation in services and cooperation between employment services and other service providers.
These multi-level challenges regarding employment provided the context for the development of targeted interventions. Following an administrative reform that transferred employment services from the state to municipalities, the City of Kokkola gained greater autonomy in

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service provision. Although the existing service palette was already extensive, greater effectiveness was sought. Consequently, employment services turned to research- and evidence-based solutions to strengthen the job search capabilities of the long-term unemployed and improve employment outcomes. Rather than developing entirely new intervention, they chose to implement coaching methods with established effectiveness, namely Taite and IPS coaching. Employment services and third-sector organisations jointly implement the Taite coaching, also continuing after the project has ended.

Regarding **employee mobility**, larger companies often have well-established practices for recruitment, as well as competence and career development. In some cases, they also provide in-house training programmes or maintain their own training institutions, reducing their need for external collaboration. In contrast, SMEs have limited opportunities for internal mobility and fewer needs for structured competence development. They also face challenges in releasing employees for training or onboarding new staff, as workforce shortages during these processes create time and cost pressures. At the employee level, individuals may lack the financial resources to pursue education or training in their own time and may also have negative prior educational experiences or learning difficulties.
Against this background, FIOH initiated negotiations with two larger employers involved in the coalition to explore interventions that would promote employee mobility within organisations. The employers identified challenges related to integrating employees with immigrant backgrounds into the workforce and the instability of career paths among younger employees, and both highlighted the need for supervisor training. Potential interventions and target units were planned in collaboration with the organisations and two regional training institutions. However, just before final decisions were made, both organisations withdrew due to ongoing organisational reforms, resource constraints affecting employees and supervisors, and existing or planned collaborations with external partners outside the region and the coalition. In parallel, local SMEs were consulted through activation events, interviews, and a survey regarding their needs and interest in joint interventions on recruitment and mobility, but none expressed willingness to engage further.

1.4 Methods

1.4.1 Recruitment of participants

Voluntary **jobseekers** for both the TAITE and IPS interventions were recruited by job coaches from the City of Kokkola's Employment Services. Individuals who enrolled in the coaching programmes were invited to participate in the study by the FIOH. In the TAITE coaching programme, FIOH provided participants with a baseline questionnaire and a return envelope at the beginning of the coaching. At the same occasion, participants were also invited to take part in a research interview, which was conducted as an individual interview after the coaching had concluded. In the IPS coaching, participants who enrolled received a study information sheet, a paper-based baseline questionnaire, a return envelope and an invitation to participate in an individual interview conducted by FIOH from the job coach. In addition to jobseekers, FIOH recruited TAITE and IPS **job coaches**, and employers involved in the IPS programme to participate in the interview study.
The job coaches were not permitted to disclose participation data to the FIOH research team, as these constituted client records rather than research data. Thus, there is no exact info

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available on the number of participants who completed or dropped out of the interventions. Based on informal information provided by the job coaches, only a few participants dropped out of the Taite coaching. No data on intervention discontinuation were available for the IPS coaching.

Voluntary **supervisors** were recruited for their coaching intervention by the HR department of the City of Kokkola. With the participants' consent, the HR department provided their contact details to the research team, which then recruited the participants into the study and sent them an electronic baseline questionnaire to be completed before the coaching. In addition, a few supervisors were recruited to participate in the interview study either before or after their participation in the coaching. FIOH conducted the interviews individually. Because the intervention was delivered by FIOH research team, data on participants' attendance were available.

To assess the effects of the supervisory intervention, the **employees** of participating supervisors were also recruited into the study. As the HR department was not permitted to disclose employees' contact information to the research team, electronic questionnaires were distributed to employees by the HR department. A quasi-experimental design was established. Accordingly, prior to each supervisory coaching group, an electronic baseline questionnaire was distributed to employees whose supervisors participating in that group. A follow-up questionnaire was then administered four months after the completion of the coaching. This procedure was repeated for all three coaching groups. Following the final coaching group, the questionnaire was distributed to all other employees of the City of Kokkola whose supervisors had not participated in the intervention, and a follow-up questionnaire was again administered four months later.

1.4.2 Attendance and participation

Table 1 presents the numbers of participants enrolled in the different interventions, together with the number of individuals who consented to participate in the study at baseline (T0) and the respondent counts at two follow-up measurement point (T1 and T2). Table 2 summarises the number of participants who took part in the qualitative interview study.

Table 1: Participants in training interventions and quantitative research activities in the Finnish Living Lab.

	Number of people recruited for the intervention	**Number of people who started the interven-tion**	**Number of people who dropped out of the intervention**	**Number of people who completed the inter-vention**	**Number of people who participated in research at T0**	**Number of people who participated in research at T1**	**Number of people who participated in research at T2**
Jobseekers Taite IPS	 N/A N/A	 79 19	 N/A N/A	 N/A N/A	 71 9	 59 1	 35 0
Employees[a]	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	185 (int.=71; cont.=114)	N/A	130 (int.= 53; cont.=77)
Supervisors	N/A	37	2	35	29	22	N/A

[a]There was no intervention targeted directly at employees.

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Table 2: Overview of qualitative data collected in the Finnish Living Lab.

	Individual level: jobseeker		**Individual level: supervisors**		**Coalition level**	
	Phase 1: theory developing[b]	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing
Interviews	0	19[a]	5	7	10	8
Focus group (number of participants)	0	0	0	0	0	1 (10)

[a] Includes interviews of Taite and IPS job coaches (4 interviews) and IPS employers (2 interviews) besides jobseekers; [b] Since the Taite and IPS coaching interventions were evidence-based, theory development was not required.

As seen in Table 1, total of 98 **jobseekers** attended the first coaching session. In total, 80 jobseekers provided their informed consent to participate in the study by answering the baseline questionnaire (T0). Those who completed this questionnaire (T0) were invited to complete the first follow-up survey (T1) either at the end of the final coaching session (Taite) or after a potential job opportunity had been presented to them during the coaching process (IPS). The second follow-up survey (T2) was mailed to participants four months after the completion of the intervention. Most participants (89.9%) in the Taite and less than half (47.4%) in the IPS coaching took part in the study at baseline (see Table 1). The response rate for the first follow-up survey of Taite was 83.1%, and for the second follow-up survey 49.3%. Survey data collection for the IPS intervention was unsuccessful. Based on available information, it is likely that some participants discontinued the intervention before its completion. Only one participant responded to the first follow-up survey. Furthermore, because the Employment Services discontinued the implementation of the intervention, the second follow-up survey was not sent. Due to the very small sample size, the IPS data could not be analysed quantitatively. As shown in Table 2, a total of 13 participants from the TAITE (n=8) and IPS (n=5) coaching programmes were interviewed. In addition, interviews were conducted with four TAITE and IPS coaches and two employers.

Table 1 shows that 37 **supervisors** enrolled in their coaching intervention. Two of them dropped out after the first coaching session. In total, 29 supervisors participated in the study at baseline and 22 immediately after the coaching, yielding response rates of 78.4% and 59.5%, respectively. Among the supervisors who consented to participate in the study, five were interviewed prior to the coaching programme and seven following its completion, each with a different individual (see Table 2).

In addition, 185 **employees** responded to the baseline and 130 to the follow-up surveys (see Table 1). Response rates could not be determined because the research team did not have access to information regarding the size of the eligible population. Of these employees, 71 represented at baseline the intervention group (i.e., employees whose supervisors

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participated in the coaching), and 114 the control group (i.e., employees whose supervisors did not participate). The employees were not interviewed.

1.4.3 Characteristics of study participants

Table 3 presents the background characteristics of the study participants.

Jobseekers who participated in the quantitative study of Taite coaching had a mean age of 38.9 years. Their gender distribution was relatively balanced, with slightly less than half of the participants being women (43.7%). At baseline, jobseekers reported that a lack of job opportunities posed a moderate challenge to their employment prospects. This factor was mentioned more frequently than any other barrier to employment. Work ability challenges did not appear to be a key obstacle to employment, as participants generally assessed their work ability as moderate. Nevertheless, considerable variation was observed in respondents' self-assessments.

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Table 3: Baseline characteristics for study participants in the Finnish Living Lab.

Population characteristics	**Jobseekers (N=71) at T0**	**Employees (N=185) at T0**	**Supervisors (N=29) at T0**
	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)
Age	38.9 (13.7)	47.5 (10.3)	39.1 (13.6)
Gender (% women)	43.7 %	81.0 %	86.2 %
Level of education • Basic education • Secondary education • Tertiary or higher education • None of the above	 9.9 % 66.2 % 21.1 % 2.8 %	 4.9 % 30.3 % 64.3 % 0.5 %	 0 % 24.1 % 75.9 % 0 %
Years of employment in City of Kokkola	N/A	12.2 (10.6)	13.5 (9.5)
Years in supervisory position	M/A	N/A	11.7 (7.8)
Weekly working hours in average	N/A	35.4 (9.3)	37.2 (4.2)
Obstacles (1-5 scale: 1=not at all, 5=very much): • Lack of job opportunities • Commuting difficulties for example: difficult transport connections, long distances • Lack of training and skills for example: language skills, lack of professional qualifications or outdated qualifications • Diminished work motivation or desire to work • Problems connected to health or functional capacity • Personal life situation for example: family, relatives, friends (caregiving, childcare)	To what extent do the following factors make it difficult for you to participate in employment? 3.91 (0.93) 2.49 (1.26) 2.45 (1.06) 2.03 (1.13) 2.05 (1.36) 1.74 (1.19)	To what extent do the following factors make it more difficult to take the next step in your career, accept a new job role, take on new tasks, or assume new responsibilities at work? 2.71 (1.39) 1.62 (1.01) 1.77 (1.04) 1.70 (0.94) 1.74 (1.04) 1.76 (1.07)	N/A
Work Ability (0-10 scale: 0=unable to work; 10=lifetime best work ability)	7.64 (1.80)	8.08 (1.31)	N/A

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Employees' mean age was 47.5. Majority of then (81%) were women. Most participants (64.3%) had at least a tertiary-level education qualification. These results indicate that the respondent sample probably overrepresented employees working in early childhood and basic education, which are typically female-dominated and highly educated occupational groups in the municipal sector. Like the jobseekers, employees perceived the lack of job opportunities to be the most important barrier to their career advancement. The employees rated their work ability as good.

The participating **supervisors** had a mean age of 39.1 years. Most participants (86.2%) were women, and the majority (75.9%) had completed a tertiary or higher education degree.

1.4.4 Methods of analysis

The **quantitative research data** were described using means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. The paired samples t-test was used to test the effects of the interventions on jobseekers' immediate outcomes such as self-efficacies and job search activity. The test measures the change by considering only on those participants who responded at both T0 and T1 (or T2). However, by using listwise deletion the mean differences that are reported in the tables (5-6) do not reflect the actual means at each measurement point. The analyse the effects of the supervisory training intervention on employee and supervisor outcomes were examined using Anova for repeated measures. Among supervisors, the immediate impact of the intervention was evaluated between T0 and T1, while among employees, longer-term changes over a four-month period were assessed between T0 and T2.
In addition, jobseekers who participated in the study also gave permission for collecting information on their employment status from the Employment Services register. These objective **register data** were available to the research team for both the baseline and the second follow-up measurement points.
The **qualitative data** consisted of interviews with jobseekers, job coaches, supervisors, and coalition stakeholders (see Table 2). The individual interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams by a member of the research team. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using a context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) framework. Subsequently, pseudonymised summaries of the interviews were produced and shared. However, summaries of the job coaches' interviews were not provided as part of the dataset. This is because, in the Kokkola municipality, it is widely known who these individuals are, as there were only four coaches involved. Therefore, even pseudonymisation cannot prevent a summary from being linked to the specific individual concerned. In addition, the CMO summaries of the coalition stakeholders do not contain any direct quotations from the data. This is because the study was conducted in a small city with a limited number of participants. Including direct quotations could potentially reveal the identity of interviewees. Furthermore, during the research ethics review conducted by the FIOH's Research Ethics Committee prior to the study, it was stipulated that the summaries must not contain direct quotations from the data in this case due to the small size of the municipality. This restriction was imposed to minimise the risk of identifying individual participants.

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1.5. Quantitative results

1.5.1 Main results for jobseekers

Register data indicates that the Taite coaching intervention had a significant **impact on employment status** among the long-term unemployed target group (see Table 4). Before the intervention commenced, almost 80 per cent of the study participants were unemployed jobseekers. None were participating in education or training, while only one participant was engaged in subsidized employment and one was employed in the open labour market. Four months after the intervention, fewer than half of the participants (48.6%) remained unemployed. However, considering the multiple barriers often faced by this target group, competitive employment cannot be regarded as a realistic outcome for all participants. In these cases, the intervention contributed to other **positive labour market transitions**, including movement into education, training, or supported employment. Such transitions represent meaningful progress and may serve as important stepping stones towards employment in the future.

Table 4: Changes in the employment status of participants in the TAITE coaching: Register-based results.

Employment status	**T0** (before the training) N (%)	**T2** (four months after the training) N (%)
Unemployed	55 (78.6%)	34 (48.6%)
Employed, subsidized employment	1 (1.4%)	4 (5.7%)
Employed, in the open labour market	1 (1.4%)	11 (15.7%)
In part-time work	3 (4.3%)	2 (2.9%)
In an employment promoting services	10 (14.3%)	11 (15.7%)
In education/training	0	4 (5.7%)
Outside the labour market	0	3 (4.3%)

* Note. At T0, 70 participants consented to the extraction of employment status data from the Employment Services register.
[a]Outside labour market often refers in this context to transition to disability retirement or old-age retirement or military service.

A more detailed analysis of individual-level changes in employment status showed that for 34 per cent of Taite participants had a positive transition during the follow-up period. They moved from unemployment to paid work, from part-time to full-time work, or from unemployment into training or employment promoting services. In contrast, 3 per cent experienced a negative transition, moving from paid employment to unemployment. In addition, 4 per cent moved outside of the labour market, for example, to pension. The remaining 59 per cent of the participants had no change in their employment status.

In addition, **comparison data** were obtained from the Employment Services registers and consisted of jobseekers who had been unemployed for more than 12 months (n = 798). The

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data were extracted in January 2025 and re-examined four months later, in May 2025, for the same cohort. The results showed that transitions from unemployment to employment were less common among individuals who had received services other than TAITE coaching. Of the 798 unemployed jobseekers, 85.5 per cent (n = 682) remained unemployed after four months. Only nine jobseekers (1.1%) had found employment in the open labour market. Twenty jobseekers (2.5%) had entered employment promoting services, while seven (0.9%) had obtained subsidized employment and another seven (0.9%) had entered education or training.

Table 5 presents the immediate effects of Taite intervention on jobseekers' perceived **skills, self-efficacies and job searching activity. One of the main** aims of Taite coaching is to improve the participants' job search self-efficacy (Wikström et al., 2025). In this respect, the intervention achieved its intended objective: participants' job search self-efficacy increased statistically significantly between the baseline (T0) and the follow-up (T1) measurements. No statistically significant changes were detected in the other outcome measures.

Table 5: Immediate (primary) effects of the Taite coaching on jobseekers' skills, self-efficacies and job searching activity (Paired sample T- test).

Outcome	**T0 N, Mean (SD)**	**T1 N, Mean (SD)**	**T2 N, Mean (SD)**	**Mean difference (T0-T1)**	**Effect Size (Cohen's d)**	**P-value**
Skills (0-1 scale)	68, 0.57 (0.15)	58, 0.59 (0.14)	37,0.59 (0.14)	0.01	0.08	0.54
Self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	70, 0.75 (0.15)	59, 0.77 (0.12)	37, 0.77 (0.15)	0.004	0.05	0.69
Job search self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	70, 0.57 (0.14)	59, 0.64 (0.14)	37, 0.60 (0.12)	0.06	**0.53**	**<0.001**
Motivation to work	69, 0.71 (0.20)	59, 0.70 (0.19)	37, 0.67 (0.24)	-0.01	-0.09	0.52
Job search attitude	69, 0.65 (0.17)	59, 0.65 (0.16)	37, 0.54 (0.18)	-0.04	-0.04	0.76
Job seeking activity (T0-T2)	66, 2.19 (3.89)	56, 2.04 (1.83)	36, 2.33 (4.35)	-0.38	-0.06	0.72

1.5.2 Main results for employees

In the long-term follow-up, there were no statistically significant differences between the intervention group (employees whose supervisor participated in the training) and the control group (employees whose supervisors did not participate) regarding employees perceived career self-efficacy, skills, career motivation and mobility, occupational well-being or evaluations of leadership behaviour besides work ability scale (see Table 6). Employees whose supervisors were assigned to the intervention group reported a modest improvement in their self-rated work ability over the follow-up period, whereas a slight deterioration was observed among those in the control group.

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Table 6. The impact of a supervisory training intervention on employee outcomes in the four months follow-up (n=123-130) (Anova for repeated measures).

Outcome	**T0 Mean (SD)**		**T2 Mean (SD)**		**Effect Size (ηp²)**	**P-value**
	Intervention	Control	Intervention	Control		
Self-efficacy for performing current job (0-1 scale)	0.78 (0.15)	0.78 (0.10)	0.78 (0.13)	0.76 (0.12)	0.012	0.22
Job progression self-efficacy (0-1 scale)	0.64 (0.18)	0.61 (0.15)	0.63 (0.16)	0.60 (0.14)	< 0.001	0.85
Skills (0-1 scale)	0.66 (.14)	0.70 (0.12)	0.65 (0.11)	0.70 (0.14)	0.001	0.77
Organisational mobility (0-1 scale)	0.53 (0.22)	0.51 (0.18)	0.50 (0.21)	0.50 (0.18)	0.002	0.58
Career planning (0-1 scale)	0.60 (0.21)	0.59 (0.22)	0.58 (0.22)	0.56 (0.20)	0.001	0.75
Job satisfaction (0-1 scale)	0.68 (0.21)	0.70 (0.15)	0.67 (0.23)	0.68 (0.17)	0.001	0.71
Work ability (0-10 scale)	8.20 (1.54)	8.05 (1.13)	8.24 (1.60)	7.93 (1.39)	**0.004**	**0.47**
Mental health (0-1 scale)	0.20 (0.17)	0.23 (0.17)	0.20 (0.17)	0.25 (0.18)	0.002	0.62
Living Lab Specific Outcomes						
Informal learning (1-5 scale)	3.15 (0.76)	2.86 (0.88)	3.00 (0.67)	2.86 (0.89)	0.011	0.24
Career search attitude (1-5 scale)	2.94 (1.12)	2.79 (0.94)	2.91 (1.03)	2.95 (0.99)	0.019	0.12
Coaching-based leadership (1-6 scale)	3.12 (1.00)	3.19 (0.95)	3.07 (0.80)	3.00 (0.96)	0.013	0.21
Supervisory support for development (1-6 scale)	4.14 (1,27)	4.03 (1.29)	4.07 (1.20)	3.93 (1.30)	< 0.001	0.87

In addition, Figure 1 illustrates that most participating employees reported no changes in their **career mobility** during the follow-up period. However, some differences were observed between the intervention and control groups. Respondents in the control group reported more frequently than those in the intervention group that they had taken on new tasks, roles, or responsibilities during the four-month follow-up period. However, the differences between the intervention and control groups were not statistically significant in terms of taking on new tasks,

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roles or responsibilities (χ^2(df) = 2.75(1), p = .10) or moving upward or sideward (χ^2(df) = 0.80(1), p = .37).

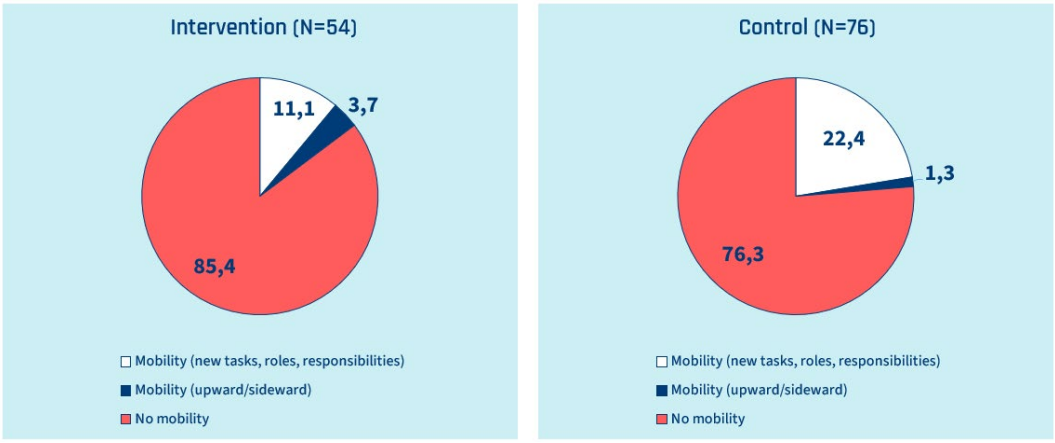

Figure 1. Employee mobility in four months follow-up.

1.5.3 Main results for supervisors

The main aim of the supervisory coaching intervention was to enhance supervisors' preparedness for supporting employees' skill and career development. Preparedness is a focal personal resource consisting of specific self-efficacies and preparation against setbacks (e.g., Pankkonen et al., 2025; Vuori & Vinokur, 2005). As seen in Table 7, the intervention had the expected short-term effect on supervisors' preparedness: the intervention increased supervisors' confidence (self-efficacies) in supporting the skill and career development of their employees and their ability to solve possible challenges (preparation against setbacks) in these areas. Cohen's d for self-efficacy was 0.78, indicating a large-sized effect, whereas Cohen's d for preparation against setbacks was 0.50, indicating a medium-sized effect.

Table 7. The impact of a supervisory training intervention on supervisors' preparedness to support employees' skills and career development (n=22).

Outcome	T0 N, Mean (SD)	T1 N, Mean (SD)	T2 N, Mean (SD)	Mean difference	Effect Size (Cohen's D)	P-value
Self-efficacy (scale 0-1)	0.64 (0.10)	0.71 (0.11)	N/A	0.07	0.78	< 0.001
Preparation against setbacks (scale 0-1)	0.52 (0.13)	0.58 (0.12)	N/A	0.06	0.50	0.02

The participating supervisors also assessed the acceptability and perceived benefits of the intervention immediately after the coaching at T1. First, the participants evaluated their satisfaction with the program and thereafter the extent to which the training enhanced their readiness in the targeted areas of the intervention program. As seen in Table 8, the participants perceived the training to be very useful for reflecting on and improving their supervisory work. Table 9 in turn shows that participants reported benefiting most from their improved readiness to understand different ways to learn at work and develop competence and to bring up competence development with their employees.

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Table 8. Supervisors' perceptions of the usefulness of the training (T1) (n=29).

Items (scale: 1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree)	**Mean (SD)**
The content of the training matched my needs and expectations.	5.00 (0.45)
I found the training useful for improving my supervisory work.	5.19 (0.61)
The training made me reflect on my ways of working.	5.29 (0.56)
During the training, I gained new ideas and perspectives for my supervisory work.	5.10 (0.62)
Because of the training, I will change some of my practices as a supervisor.	4.76 (0.83)
I learned something new during the training.	4.90 (0.89)

Table 9. Supervisors' perceptions of the benefits of the training (T1) (n=29).

To what extent did the training provide your readiness to… (scale: 1=not at all, 5=very much)	**Mean (SD)**
support employees in workplace learning and competence development?	3.81 (0.60)
promote employees' career development?	3.38 (0.80)
understand different ways to learn at work and develop competences?	4.14 (0.65)
strengthen employees' motivation for workplace learning and competence development?	3.62 (0.74)
bring up issues related to competence development with employees?	4.10 (0.62)
solve supervisory challenges related to employees' workplace learning and competence development?	3.60 (0.60)

1.6 Realist evaluation (qualitative) results: coalition level

1.6.1 General context information

Kokkola is a medium-sized city and employment region in Finland and small by European standards. This bilingual city has ~48.200 inhabitants and is located on the west coast of Finland. In 2022, 18% of inhabitants were under 15 years old, 59% were aged 15−64 and 23% were over 64 years old. The educational level of inhabitants is polarised: 21% of them has a higher education, whereas secondary education is lacking from 25% of inhabitants (Kokkola municipal information card).
In November 2023, 3127 companies had their operations in Kokkola. The largest sector was retail. Most of the companies (83%) were micro-organisations having less than six employees. The biggest employers in the region are the municipality of Kokkola (~2.300 employees) and Wellbeing services county of Central Ostrobothnia (Soite) (~4.000 employees). In November 2023, there were 383 vacancies open in Kokkola. The vacancies were most often open in health and social care sector, food industry, catering business, and inorganic chemistry (Kokkola municipal information card).

1.6.2 Key mechanisms driving coalition formation and functioning

Governance procedures and leadership: The importance of leadership as a mechanism was emphasised in the stakeholder interviews throughout the project. In the early phase of the coalition, the absence of leadership was identified as a main barrier to forming a well-functioning and committed coalition, which in turn led to vague multi-lateral collaboration and low participant engagement. Stakeholders identified leadership and strategic alignment as

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essential foundations for a sustainable coalition by clarifying roles, coordinating operations, and guiding decision-making. Effective collaboration was seen to require a clearly mandated leader (ideally a public authority with formal responsibility) supported by shared objectives, a common strategy, and formal governance arrangements such as contracts. Neutral (public) leadership was seen to lower barriers to participation and promote collective goals rather than the interests of individual organisations. Under these conditions, the coalition is more likely to achieve stronger collaboration, coordinated interventions, sustained commitment, and continuity beyond project cycles. Conversely, unclear, fragmented, or actor-driven leadership can undermine trust and participation, limiting impact of the coalition.
Stakeholders also viewed positively the coalition structure consisting of four smaller working groups alongside a central coordinating body. Assigning concrete tasks to the working groups and jointly reviewing progress within the wider coalition was seen to strengthen ownership, encourage goal-oriented work, and maintain momentum between coalition meetings. This structure supports continuous collaboration rather than merely functioning as a discussion forum, leading to stronger commitment, more concrete solutions, and tangible progress.

Member participation and diversity: Stakeholders viewed the active participation of a diverse range of stakeholders as essential for coalition functioning, effectiveness and stability. Coalition success was seen to depend not only on committed individuals capable of contributing to concrete actions, but also on credible institutional actors that provide coordination, legitimacy, and resources. When diverse stakeholders are actively engaged, the coalition can draw on a broader range of perspectives, knowledge, and expertise, resulting in more effective, coordinated, and sustainable solutions.
It was agreed that the most relevant stakeholders were already included in the coalition, representing a range of functions with distinct perspectives and roles (e.g., public services, Wellbeing services county, third-sector organisations, educational institutions, and employers). However, there were calls for stronger participation from SMEs, entrepreneurs' associations, chamber of commerce, and organisations involved in regional business development and social security funding. Greater involvement of actors closely connected to employers would provide valuable insights into companies' conditions and needs, while also encouraging higher participation among them. This, in turn, would enhance the coalition's effectiveness, even if the direct participation capacity of individual SMEs remains limited. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for coalition to strengthen collaboration between educational institutions and employers. Closer cooperation can improve the responsiveness and adaptability of education and training provision to changing labour market needs.

Collaboration and commitment: In the beginning of the coalition, many stakeholders highlighted that there was already well-functioning bilateral cooperation between them. However, commitment to broader, multi-level collaboration remained limited although it was seen that in challenging labour market conditions, the need to find solutions to complicated problems encourages collaboration among various stakeholders.
Strategic alignment and shared and concrete objectives were seen as key mechanisms for enhancing collaboration and engagement. Moreover, a clear structure, structured processes and defined roles and responsibilities (incl. leadership) were seen to create trust, a sense of purpose and engagement. The coalition should also address issues that clearly benefit its members, and the value of participation must be effectively communicated to all stakeholders. An overly narrow focus on individual stakeholders' activities was not considered conducive to

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effective coalition-building, as it does not foster broad ownership. Many stakeholders emphasised the need for a coalition agreement to bind partners together, strengthen commitment, and enhance sustainability beyond project-based cooperation. The establishment of working groups was seen as particularly important for translating commitment into action, thereby supporting the coalition's sustainability and effectiveness.
The importance of these mechanisms is amplified in contexts where stakeholders face competing priorities, limited resources, and multiple responsibilities across organisations and networks. In such circumstances, clearly defined coalition goals and tangible benefits for participants' own work are essential. Without them, the coalition may be perceived as an additional burden, leading stakeholders to prioritise organisational objectives over joint action. This can result in fragmented efforts, duplication of activities, and limited coordination.

Communication and knowledge sharing: Communication and knowledge sharing were identified as key mechanisms for strengthening collaboration and commitment within the coalition. Although stakeholders were familiar with one another, more open and regular information sharing along with structured discussions and face-to-face meetings, were seen as important for enabling stakeholders to exchange information, knowledge, experiences, and perspectives that would otherwise remain fragmented across organisation. Through these exchanges, coalition members develop a shared situational awareness, improve coordination, build trust, strengthen motivation for joint problem-solving and create a sense of continuity. Over time, effective communication and knowledge sharing can improve intervention design and the sustainability of coalition activities.
It was suggested that coalition could be supported through a shared platform for information exchange and dialogue, enabling more systematic communication and coordination between stakeholders. However, high data protection requirements may constrain information sharing. Concerns about privacy risks and regulatory compliance can make stakeholders hesitant to exchange information. As a result, opportunities to develop data-driven solutions and coordinate actions effectively may be reduced.

Stakeholder relationships and trust: Stakeholders emphasised trust and strong relationships among coalition members as critical enablers (i.e., mechanisms) of effective collaboration and coordination. As mentioned above, trust associates with open communication, knowledge sharing, and a willingness to work towards shared goals. In this relatively small region, where most stakeholders are familiar with one another, existing bilateral relationships have already created a strong foundation of trust that supports close cooperation. At the same time, trust could be further strengthened through regular joint actions, opportunities for both formal and informal exchange and accessible support among stakeholders, which contribute to sustained collaboration over time.
Other mechanisms: Tailoring of solutions was identified as a key mechanism for strengthening engagement. In particular, for SMEs tailored training and support services could increase motivation to participate in coalition activities. In addition, a sector-specific focus could enhance employer engagement within the coalition.

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1.6.3 Contextual circumstances associated with mechanisms

Governance structure: Since early 2025, responsibility for employment services has shifted from the state to municipalities, which have formed employment regions. The City of Kokkola belongs to the Central Ostrobothnia region with seven smaller municipalities. Prior to this **administrative reform**, a municipal coordinating body fostered stakeholder collaboration and established cooperation as a shared norm, supporting coalition building in this project. The reform **decentralises** decision-making, increases regional autonomy, and enables better consideration of local conditions. It allows municipalities to set priorities, develop localised services, test new approaches, and build partnerships such as coalitions and collaborate within them. The reform has also made economic considerations more prominent ("euroization"), as municipalities now bear greater financial responsibility. As a result, employers' perspectives and needs are more strongly integrated into employment services, thus increasing diverse memberships in the coalition and, increasing the likelihood of solutions that both support vulnerable groups and generate cost savings.
Despite its positive outcomes, the administrative reforms have also **generated uncertainty**, necessitated the reorganisation of operations, and imposed additional demands on stakeholders, consequently diverting resources from coalition building. During reform processes, attention is typically directed primarily towards internal organisational matters and management, rather than towards the development of coalitions.

Existing national social policies: Although responsibility for employment services has been decentralised, national legislation and funding mechanisms continue to guide operations. Recent national policy changes have affected key employment instruments, reduced resources and financial support for employment promotion and set more obligations for jobseekers. For example, the eligibility criteria for wage subsidies have been tightened, and rehabilitative work activities in the third sector have been restricted. In addition, the adult education allowance has been abolished. At the same time, municipalities are financially responsible for unemployment through penalty payments, which influences their incentives to promote employment. These **policy developments** have several consequences. It limits employers' ability to recruit individuals in vulnerable labour market positions and restricts opportunities for skills development, particularly for those with limited resources. On the other hand, it can increase collaboration between stakeholders and motivate to foster diverse membership in the coalition (i.e., greater employer engagement) and development of new support mechanisms.

Institutional quality and effectiveness: The small region is characterised by long-standing, network-based collaboration built on close interpersonal and bilateral relationships. As stakeholders know each other well, it creates trust, enables flexible cooperation and the continuous adaptation of collaborative practices. The established relationships have remained largely unaffected by the recent employment services and health and social care reforms. However, such **relationship-based collaboration** requires active maintenance by the partners. As a shortcoming, the **long-standing bilateral networks** may also create an overestimation of the extent of cooperation, potentially limiting attention to the development and renewal of collaborative practices.
To make the coalition stronger, greater participation of the Wellbeing services county in the coalition and in collaboration is recommended. However, layoffs and co-determination

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negotiations in the county have limited its capacity to participate. In addition, the municipal business development company could have a stronger role in the coalition as it has direct links to both large companies and SMEs and could promote the coalition by disseminating information to employers. When companies are approached with concrete, context-specific measures such as tailored training, information on financial incentives, and accessible workplace support, they probably are more likely to participate in the coalition and its activities. However, regional development activities have often focused on large companies. Strengthening SME-oriented outreach and responsiveness is therefore essential for the coalition improving employment of vulnerable people.

Labour market structure: The regional labour market is predominantly composed of **SMEs,** many of which are entrepreneur-led and operate without dedicated human resources capacity. Their activities are strongly focused on core business operations, leaving limited time, resources, or motivation for participation in broader initiatives such as coalitions. This is particularly evident in contexts of weak overall employment. Nevertheless, some SMEs express willingness to employ individuals in vulnerable labour market positions, but their structural constraints often make this difficult in practice. Companies' limited growth orientation and a focus on day-to-day operations reduce incentives to invest in training, skills development, or inclusive hiring practices. In addition, the fluctuating labour demands (i.e., the need for labour force is unstable and changes quickly) challenge employers, training institutions and employment services. The public services often operate within inflexible structures and schedules, whereas companies' needs may arise quickly and unpredictably. Moreover, a mismatch between jobseekers' skills and job vacancies exists.

Economic situation: Due to the weak economic situation of the state, cuts have been made to social security and services, and further reductions are expected. This creates uncertainty, erodes trust in services, and makes it more difficult to improve the situation of vulnerable groups. Kokkola municipality also faces **increasing unemployment and limited job opportunities,** creating an employers' market. Employers prioritise immediate business needs, prefer tailored training, and carefully select their employees. All this weakens the labour market position of vulnerable people. Furthermore, as resources are directed towards maintaining core operations, less attention is given to developing employment-related measures or the coalition itself. However, in the economic downturn coalition-based cooperation seems to become increasingly important for identifying and developing solutions to support vulnerable groups. In addition, as a future labour shortage is anticipated due to industrial growth, coalition is seen essential to platform for strategic planning and preparedness.

Education and training system: The education and training system has been affected by reduced national funding, leading to cuts in provision, qualifications, and changes in content. At the same time, changes in the labour market require constant skill updating. This creates challenges for maintaining adequate and responsive training opportunities. Despite these constraints, the region benefits from multiple education providers, and from strong partnerships and formal agreements. Training institutions also aim to respond to SME needs by offering targeted courses and continuing education opportunities for improving job matching and onboarding. In addition, a regional skills forecasting network supports shared understanding of future competence needs among employers and other stakeholders.

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Collaboration is further supported by municipal ownership of regional training institutions, which creates aligned incentives for cooperation. Although the abolition of the adult education allowance has reduced individuals' financial ability to pursue training, coalition-based cooperation can help provide alternative support for career development.

Cultural attitudes toward vulnerable groups: Attitudes toward vulnerable groups vary. Professionals within the service system generally hold positive views, but employers' attitudes are more mixed. Concerns about commitment, productivity, and potential absences are common, especially toward those with longer unemployment histories or immigrants with limited language skills. These attitudes are shaped by broader labour market conditions. In times of high unemployment, when employers can be more selective, prejudices may intensify. Although negative attitudes are not widespread, they can be influential. At the same time, several factors support more inclusive outcomes. For example, the region's rural character fosters social responsibility, and there are also employers and partners committed to socially responsible practices. Practical measures such as anonymous recruitment and targeted support for onboarding, skills development, and workplace adjustment can further improve the situation.

Other context factors: The service system lacks sufficient resources and structures to support **employed individuals** in vulnerable positions. As a result, skill development often depends on individuals' own initiative. At the same time, structural changes in the labour market have reduced the availability of entry-level jobs with low qualification requirements. Increasing emphasis on formal education, combined with fewer accessible job opportunities, limits entry pathways into employment for individuals with limited skills or work experience. In addition, the informants saw that although high data protection strengthens trust and legitimacy, it also slows down and complicates information exchange and collaboration.

1.6.4 Coalition outcomes

Because the coalition in the Finnish Living Lab played only a limited role in the co-creation and tailoring of individual interventions within this project, the stakeholder interviews yielded relatively little information on how the coalition influenced the inflow of jobseekers and employee mobility, or on the contextual factors and mechanisms associated with these outcomes. Instead, stakeholders mainly reflected on the conditions that shaped coalition building, as well as the relationships between contextual factors, and coalition-related mechanisms and outcomes, such as effective functioning and long-term sustainability. These findings have been presented above.

However, it was emphasised that a well-functioning coalition may also contribute to improving labour market participation and mobility among vulnerable groups in the region. A concrete example of successful collaboration in the coalition is the Taite coaching, jointly implemented by two stakeholders. This shared initiative whose results have been regularly monitored has functioned as a form of social glue, strengthening trust and communication between stakeholders and fostering collaboration more broadly within the coalition and finally producing higher employment among participants.

With regard to efforts to **support inflow of jobseekers**, six Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations were identified from the stakeholder interviews (see below). Overall, these CMOs highlighted the importance of clear leadership, shared goals, and the exchange

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of information and good practices as key resources. These resources triggered the following mechanisms: fostered a shared understanding of challenges and opportunities, enhanced problem-solving and resource allocation, promoted more coordinated and proactive actions, strengthened stakeholder commitment, and encouraged innovation. In turn, these processes contributed to the effective functioning of the coalition and may ultimately lead to improvements in employment opportunities and labour market participation among vulnerable groups.

CMOS for jobseekers' inflow:

1. **If** stakeholders operate in a time-constrained, resource-limited, and multi-network environment, **then** a coalition with shared goals, clear coordination, and well-defined leadership roles can create structure, purpose, and alignment in collaborative work, which in turn **may lead to** an improved capacity to coordinate and target interventions that support the labour market entry of vulnerable groups.
2. **If** there is high unemployment and decreasing job opportunities in the region, **then** coalition-level collaboration and support between relevant regional stakeholders promote strategic alignment, coordinated efforts, and shared resource allocation, which **may lead to** an enhanced inflow of vulnerable groups by creating pathways that align their needs with available opportunities.
3. **If** there is a shortage of entry-level jobs in the region, **then** the coalition can facilitate the sharing of successful employer practices and models for supporting these specific situations by promoting increased understanding, adaptation, and innovation among other stakeholders, which **may lead to** wider adoption of these models and improved employment opportunities for low-skilled jobseekers.
4. **If** information on labour market needs, vacancies, and jobseekers is dispersed across organisations and labour market mismatch persists, **then** coalition-based interaction and knowledge sharing among relevant stakeholders can create a shared understanding and better coordination, which in turn **may lead to** improved matching between jobseekers and vacancies and increased inflows into employment or employment-related services.
5. **If** labour shortages are anticipated in the region, **then** collaboration and strategic planning among coalition stakeholders can improve preparedness for future recruitment needs by fostering proactive workforce development, skills alignment, and targeted training initiatives, which may lead to increased employment opportunities for vulnerable groups in the future.
6. **If** there are high structural unemployment and competition for jobs in the region that affects all stakeholder, **then** stakeholders are more motivated to collaborate with shared objective within the coalition, enabling multi-stakeholder problem-solving and coordinated action that **may lead to** better alignment between workforce skills and labour market needs.

In the stakeholder interviews, less information was available on initiatives aimed at improving employee mobility. However, three potential CMOs were identified (see below). Stakeholders highlighted information sharing, joint planning, and co-creation as key mechanisms that can help identify potential career pathways, develop more targeted training and professional

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development opportunities, and thereby promote mobility across roles both within and between organisations in the future.

CMOS for employee mobility:

1. **If** stakeholders have limited resources to promote career mobility independently, **then** active participation in the coalition can facilitate information sharing, coordination, and joint planning, which **may lead to** the identification of career pathways and in the long-term increased employee mobility across roles and organisations.
2. **If** structural changes in the labour market and evolving skill requirements create uncertainty and there are resource constraints, **then** a coalition of diverse stakeholders can build a shared situational understanding and co-design measures that better match labour market needs, which in turn **may lead to** better targeted training and development opportunities as well as opportunities for career transitions and workforce mobility.
3. **If** there is a shortage of entry-level jobs in the region, **then** the coalition can provide a platform for educational institutions and employers to jointly design and plan interventions, which **may lead to** better-aligned pathways into employment and improved labour market mobility.

1.7 Realist evaluation (qualitative) results: individual level

In the Finnish Living Lab, three individual-level interventions were implemented: TAITE and IPS coaching for unemployed jobseekers, as well as supervisory training for supervisors in the City of Kokkola. Next, we describe each of them individually, including their CMOs.

1.7.1 TAITE coaching

Training context: evidence-based training program conducted by trained instructors
Taite-coaching is the latest Finnish adaptation of the JOBS© peer group-based method, which has been shown to effectively strengthen the job search skills and mental well-being of unemployed individuals. The efficacy of the JOBS method has been demonstrated in several randomized controlled trials conducted in different countries (see a meta-analytic review by Liu et al., 2014; a summary of international studies by Vuori & Price, 2015). The aim of Taite-coaching is to enhance participants' employment prospects in the open labour market and to reduce the negative effects of unemployment on self-confidence and self-efficacy.
The decision to implement Taite-coaching was made by the Employment Services of the City of Kokkola. At the beginning of the SYNCLUSIVE project, the municipal employment services were particularly seeking research- and evidence-based solutions to strengthen the job search abilities of the long-term unemployed and ultimately improve their employment. Due to an administrative reform in which employment services were transferred from the state to municipalities (in the City of Kokkola in 2023), municipal employment services gained greater decision-making autonomy regarding the services offered to their clients. Although the service palette was already rather extensive, greater effectiveness was expected. Instead of developing new interventions, the employment services decided to test and implement a method that had already been proven effective.

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In this Living Lab, a Taite-coaching group typically consisted of 6–12 participants (jobseekers) who met for five consecutive days, simulating a full working week. Participation in the coaching was voluntary and financially supported so that participants maintained their employment benefits throughout the training and received small reimbursements (i.e., 9 euros) for travel costs, for example. The training sessions were held face-to-face at the premises of local partners (e.g., employment services or third-sector organisations). The peer-learning process was facilitated by two instructors per group, all of whom had been trained by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. The instructors followed standardized method manuals, and participants used their own workbooks. The instructors were experienced job coaches from employment services and a third-sector organisation. They worked in pairs and were familiar with the participants' situations and challenges.

Jobseekers' context: prolonged unemployment causes many challenges that can be tackled in Taite coaching

The employment services decided to target Taite coaching to jobseekers who had been unemployed for at least one year, which is the threshold for long-term unemployment in Finland. Although the target group was heterogeneous, participants shared many common challenges. Many participants had health or work ability concerns of varying severity, low or lacked vocational education, outdated qualifications or skills, limited work experience, or possessed insufficient Finnish language skills. Furthermore, prolonged periods out of work had negatively affected many participants' self-perception and self-esteem. Many of them no longer trusted in themselves, their abilities, or their chances of finding employment. Their job search skills often needed updating: their application documents did not meet current standards, and they required practice in job-interview situations. Participants with a migrant background had limited knowledge about Finnish working life and were often afraid to use Finnish in job seeking. However, most participants were very motivated to find employment and were eager to take part in Taite coaching, whereas others had become passive, discouraged, and unmotivated to apply for jobs. This latter group was often quite distant from the open labour market. They had ended up in services after other or were waiting for more permanent solutions, such as work disability related retirement.

At present (in 2026), Finland has the highest unemployment rate in Europe, creating an employer's market where they can select the strongest candidates. Our target group therefore starts from a clear disadvantage. However, if they manage to demonstrate their motivation and skills through tailored job application documents, present themselves convincingly in job interviews, and frame their challenges in a positive way (for example, as learning experiences), their chances of finding employment will improve, especially when the economic situation strengthens again and the demand for labour increases.

1.7.1.1 CMOs for TAITE coaching

Practicing real-life job-search situations, identifying strengths, and giving positive feedback build skills, positive self-perception and confidence in job seeking

Mechanism

The training provided participants with opportunities to *practice job searching in real-life situations*. It included, for example, exercises in which they developed their job-application

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documents, practices how to succeed in job interviews, and learned to introduce themselves to employers in a positive light by using their existing strengths. In these exercises, they also *learned from each other's experiences*. These activities improved participants' *job-search skills*. In the training, each participant's *strengths and skills were* also *identified* and used in various exercises. The participants also received *positive and supportive feedback* from instructors and peers. These processes helped them develop *a more positive self-perception* and increased their *self-confidence* in job seeking.

Outcomes
After the training, participants are more likely to show *greater perseverance and increased activity in job searching*, instead of procrastination and avoidance. Due to their improved skills and self-efficacy in job-search, they also have *better possibilities of finding employment*.

Context:

jobseekers
These mechanisms seemed particularly relevant because the job search skills of those who have been unemployed for a long time often need updating. Furthermore, prolonged unemployment has typically had a negative effect on many participants' self-perceptions and their self-esteem and confidence in finding a job. They may believe that they do not have any strengths or skills relevant to the labour market. However, many of them are motivated to find a job and therefor also motivated to participate in the training.

Overarching CMO

If jobseekers have been unemployed for a long time and have weak job-search skills and low confidence in themselves and their employment prospects, **then** practical job search training may build their skills, positive self-perception and confidence in job seeking, **because** it offers opportunities to practice real-live job search situations, identifies participants' existing strengths, and provides supportive feedback from peers and instructors, **which may lead to** participants' more active and persistent efforts to find employment and, ultimately better possibilities of obtaining a job.

2) Participatory exercises providing positive feedback and peer support increase engagement and activity

Mechanism
The training utilised group-work exercises and *participatory methods,* such as drama exercises, in which participants received *positive feedback* from the rest of the group. This increased participants' *activity levels* and *engagement,* instead of them remaining passive bystanders.

Outcomes
After the training, the participants are more likely to feel vigorous and energetic. The improved level of activity also indicates that they will be more active and engaged in future job search efforts.

Context:

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jobseekers
The participatory and activating elements of the training seemed particularly relevant because the participants had become passive and be unmotivated in their job searching due to prolonged unemployment caused by severe challenges related to health, education and work experience.

Overarching CMO

If jobseekers have been unemployed for a long time, for example due to poor health, and have become passive in their job searching, **then** practical training that utilises participatory methods, such as group work and drama exercises, and that offers positive feedback and peer support, may strengthen participants' levels of activity, energy, vigour, and engagement. This is **because** it helps break the passivity the participants may have become accustomed to. These changes **may lead to** greater activity and efforts in future job-search activities.

3) Support and encouragement from peers and instructors create a feeling of being accepted

Mechanism
The training, which focused on *positives and opportunities* rather than difficulties and utilised *peer support and encouragement* created a sense of normalisation. The participants recognised similar challenges among their peers and received support from them, which fostered a feeling *of being accepted and not being alone* in their difficult (unemployment) situation.

Outcomes
As a result of the training, participants' feelings of failure are likely to decrease. They will remain engaged in the training rather than dropping out, even if they are initially sceptical during the first session. Furthermore, if transitioning to the open labour market is not realistic for them, the training can still increase their activity levels and help them identify alternative paths forward (e.g., retirement or other services).

Context:

jobseekers
Peer support and encouragement appeared particularly relevant because jobseekers usually receive support only from job coaches. Peer support was a new element for them that contributed to *normalization*. Support and encouragement were also important because the participants had low self-esteem and self-confidence and had experienced many setbacks in job seeking. Due to their challenging circumstances, their risk to dropping out of the training was higher.

Hindering factors
Training that enhances job search skills and offers support and encouragement may be less effective for participants who lack genuine motivation to find employment, face major health or work-ability challenges, or are not required to seek work. The training cannot create motivation for job seeking if it is entirely absent.

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Overarching CMO

If jobseekers face significant health or work ability challenges, lack confidence in their ability to find a job, and are not motivated to pursue employment, **then** peer-group support and encouragement and exercises focusing on positive rather than challenges and difficulties, may enhance participants' sense of being accepted **because** shared experiences can normalise difficulties. This **may reduce feelings** of failure, increase activity levels and help identify alternative paths forward beyond employment.

4) Practicing job search situations in Finnish within an encouraging group increases immigrants' skills and confidence to use Finnish language

Mechanism
A positive and encouraging atmosphere in the training group *encourages* participants with an immigrant background s *to speak Finnish* during the training sessions. The training provided opportunities to *practice job search in real-life situations in Finnish,* which increased their *skills and confidence* to cope with job-search situations in Finnish and reduced the stress they associated with searching for work in foreign language.

Outcomes
Training will equip immigrants with skills they can apply in job searching and thereby will improve their chances of finding employment.

Context:

jobseekers
Training that offers knowledge about Finnish working life and enhances both job search and language skills appeared particularly relevant for participants with an immigrant background. The positive and encouraging group atmosphere lowered the threshold for using Finnish, as many participants were initially afraid to speak it.

Hindering factors

Training may offer less added value for highly educated immigrants. They often possess strong professional skills and may need more specialized guidance from instructors on their job-search process – guidance that peers with more severe challenges cannot provide. Consequently, without tailoring, the training may not substantially improve their employment prospects.

Overarching CMO

If jobseekers have an immigrant background and limited Finnish language skill, **then** peer-group-based training that provides and encouraging atmosphere and opportunities to practice job-search situations in Finnish may improves their confidence and skills**, because** it encourages participants to use Finnish and reduces the stress they associate with job searching in a foreign language, **which, in turn, may lead to improved** chances of finding employment.

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1.7.2 IPS coaching

Training context: evidence-based coaching conducted by trained instructors

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is an internationally researched, evidence-based employment support method originally developed to promote employment among individuals with mental health conditions. The method emphasises rapid job search with the aim of placing jobseekers in competitive employment as early as possible, followed by the provision of intensive and individualised support once employment has begun. IPS is delivered according to standardised procedures, and method-specific training is available for professionals implementing the service (https://ipsworks.org/index.php/evidence-for-ips/).

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that IPS coaching can enhance health and well-being. Studies indicate improvements in self-esteem, hope, social networks, and quality of life among jobseekers with mental health conditions (Bond & Drake, 2014; Modini, Joyce et al., 2016; Waddell & Burton, 2006; Drake & Wallach, 2020). IPS has also been adapted to support the employment of other groups in vulnerable positions, including clients of various social services. In Finland, IPS-based employment support has been successfully piloted not only for individuals recovering from mental health conditions but also within adult social work and disability services, under the name “Quality Criteria–Based Employment Support” (Blomgren et al., 2025).

The decision to implement IPS coaching in the Finnish Living Lab was not jointly made by all coalition partners. Similar to the rationale for adopting Taite-coaching (see above), the municipal employment services sought evidence-based methods to strengthen the labour market participation of long-term unemployed individuals facing significant barriers to employment. Rather than developing entirely new interventions, employment services opted to test and introduce a method with established effectiveness.

In the Finnish Living Lab, IPS-coaching was delivered by three job coaches employed by the municipal employment services. All had completed formal IPS instructor training and provided IPS coaching alongside their other responsibilities; thus, they were not exclusively dedicated to employment support. Clients consisted of long-term unemployed individuals who were recommended by employment services to participate voluntarily. The job coaches implemented IPS in line with its core principles, focusing on rapid job search tailored to each participant’s strengths, skills, and interests. After job placement, the job coaches also provided ongoing support to both employee and employer. The frequency of face-to-face meetings in IPS was higher than in standard employment services.

However, the implementation of IPS-coaching did not proceed as intended. Staff turnover among job coaches led to interruptions in service delivery. Employment opportunities were not fully explored, and clients may not have been sufficiently informed or engaged, leading some to discontinue participation. Monitoring the service also proved challenging: response rates to questionnaires were low, and changes in instructors disrupted the data collection process. After six months, the employment services decided to discontinue the intervention. At that time, regional unemployment was increasing rapidly, making it unfeasible for instructors to focus exclusively on the limited caseload of approximately 20 clients per job coach required by the IPS model. In fact, employment services are responsible for numerous statutory duties, including meeting with unemployed jobseekers, preparing employment plans, and monitoring job-search activities. As unemployment increased, job coaches were required to divide their time between IPS coaching and these mandated responsibilities. Consequently, statutory

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obligations often took precedence, limiting the resources available for the implementation of the IPS intervention.

Jobseekers' context: prolonged employment causes challenges that require more individualised support

The employment services decided to target IPS-coaching to jobseekers who faced multiple challenges to entering the labour market. Consequently, the client group consisted not only of long-term unemployed individuals but also of others experiencing significant challenges related to employment. These challenges included health conditions, limited or narrow work experience, low educational attainment, financial difficulties, and broader life circumstances. A common denominator among participants was low self-efficacy, uncertainty regarding the labour market, and previous unsuccessful job-search experiences. In addition, many participants required support in strengthening their job-search skills. All participants engaged in the IPS coaching voluntarily, expressed interest in the service, and demonstrated motivation to participate.

At present, Finland has the highest unemployment rate in Europe, resulting in an employer's labour market in which employers can select the most confident and competitive job applicants. As a result, the target group is at a clear disadvantage. However, if job coaches succeed in encouraging jobseekers, helping them identify their strengths and competences, and leveraging existing connections with local employers during the job-search process, the jobseekers' prospects of gaining employment are likely to improve.

1.7.2.1 CMOs for IPS coaching

1) Regular in-person meetings with job coaches, combined with completing job-search-related developmental tasks, increase understanding of the job-search process, roles and responsibilities

Mechanism

IPS coaching included *regular face-to-face meetings* with job coaches, completed by *interim developmental tasks* that supported progress in the job-search process (e.g., identifying personal strengths and interests). These activities enhanced participants' *understanding of job-search process* as a whole, as well as their roles and responsibilities within it.

Outcomes

As IPS coaching progresses, participants' ability to plan their actions and manage their time during the job-search process will improve. They will develop a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities, which will strengthen their activity, engagement and sense of ownership in job seeking.

Context:

jobseekers

Regular face-to-face meeting meetings, individualized support and structured and scheduled job-search exercises appeared particularly important for participants facing complex life situations, those whose job-search skills had eroded during prolonged unemployment, and individuals with limited experiences in planning and directing their own actions. Personal

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support from a job coach and recognition of strengths enhanced self-efficacy and confidence among participants who had repeatedly experienced unsuccessful job-search attempts yet remained motivated to find employment.

Overarching CMO

If jobseekers have been unemployed for a long time, have multiple negative experiences related to job-search and employment services, and have diminished confidence and job-search skills, **then** IPS coaching may increase their understanding of the job-search process and their roles and responsibilities within it, **because** it provides regular individualized support and clarifies the job-search process through step-by-step tasks completed by participants. **This may lead to** participants' improved ability to plan and regulate their job-search activity leading to greater engagement, reduced passivity, and stronger ownership in the job-search process.

2) Financial counselling reduces stress and uncertainty and increases motivation and confidence in employment

Mechanism
IPS coaching included *financial counselling* provided by job coaches. This counselling *reduced* participants' *stress and uncertainty about their financial situation* and increased their *motivation and confidence* in pursuing employment.

Outcomes
When participants are less concerned about their financial situation and how the employment might affect it, they will become more motivated and active in seeking work.

Context: jobseekers

Financial counselling appeared particularly relevant because prolonged unemployment often leads to a gradual deterioration of an individual's financial situation, eventually exhausting any savings. Jobseekers' incomes become dependent on various unemployment-related benefits, requiring careful budgeting around payment dates. Even small amounts of earned income can interrupt benefit payments or lead to long processing delays. The financial counselling offered through IPS consisted of practical computational support and concrete examples illustrating how, for instance, part-time or fixed-term employment affects different benefits, and how irregular earnings and benefits can be coordinated. By receiving accurate financial information and support in managing the interactions between earned income and benefits, participants experienced reduced financial stress. This, in turn, enhanced their motivation and their ability to focus on active job-search, as less energy was required to manage an already fragile financial situation.

Overarching CMO

If jobseekers experience financial difficulties and rely on multiple social benefits for their livelihood, **then** IPS coaching may reduce their stress and increase their motivation and confidence in employment. This is **because**, IPS provides accurate financial counselling and support in coordinating benefits with earned income, reducing fear that employment will

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destabilize their financial situation. This **may in turn may lead** to more positive attitude toward employment and improved motivation for active job seeking.

3) Identifying strengths and using employer networks creates more positive self-perception and strengthens confidence in employment prospects

Mechanism

IPS coaching helped to *identify* participants' *skill and strengths* and *focused on positives* and opportunities rather than difficulties. This helped them to develop a *more positive self-perception and stronger self-confidence* in job seeking. In addition, job coaches' efforts to *use their existing employer networks* to search for suitable employment opportunities increased participants' *confidence* in their value in the labour market and their prospects for finding work.

Outcomes

As participants' confidence in their employment prospects improve, their likelihood of becoming employed will increase.

Context: jobseekers

Recognizing strengths and skills and emphasizing positives seemed particularly important for participants whose work experience came mainly from a single employer or a narrow occupational field, those with low educational attainment, and those facing other challenging life circumstances. Such jobseekers may believe they lack strengths or skill relevant to the labour market and may develop negative self-perception. This may also reduce their willingness to approach potential employers. In this context, job coaches' use of their employer networks to match jobseekers (with particular skills) with specific employers improves employment prospect and opportunities to find employment.

Overarching CMO

If jobseekers are uncertain about their skills and their prospect in the labour market, yet motivated to find work, **then** IPS coaching may enhance their positive self-perceptions and increase confidence in becoming employed, **because** it identifies their strengths and skills and utilizes job coach's employer contacts to match jobseekers with suitable employment opportunities. This **may lead** to jobseekers' better chances of becoming employed.

4) Active communication and available support for employers reduce hesitation and increase confidence in the hiring process

Mechanism

Active *information sharing* with employers *about the benefits, services and support* available when hiring unemployed individuals in vulnerable situations *reduced* employers' *uncertainty and hesitation* regarding hiring. This transparency *increased their trust and confidence* in the hiring process.

Outcomes

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Awareness of the support offered by job coaches increased employers' willingness to hire people in vulnerable situations.

Context:
employers
Some employers wish to take social responsibility by offering jobs and training opportunities to jobseekers in vulnerable situations. However, they may lack information about the financial incentives or other support mechanisms available to them when hiring someone in a vulnerable position. They may also perceive the risks of hiring as too high or have limited trust in the recruitment process, which in turn can reduce their willingness to offer employment. In this context, job coaches' personal contacts and active communication about the benefits, services, and support may be particularly important for reducing these hesitations.

Hindering factors
If job coaches do not take an active approach by building employer contacts or maintaining regular communication with employers, then, even if employers are initially interested in hiring people in vulnerable situations, they will not receive the information or support they need to follow through.

Overarching CMO

If employers are willing to hire people in vulnerable situations but have limited knowledge of the incentives, services and support available to them, **then** the employer-focused support included in IPS coaching may reduce their uncertainty and hesitation regarding recruitment-related risks and increase their trust and confidence in. This is **because** job coaches are easily accessible and provide employers with relevant information and services. This **may lead** to employers' greater willingness to hire people in vulnerable situations.

1.7.3 Supervisory training

Training context: Competence development at the core of human resource strategy
Supervisors often influence both employees' access to developmental opportunities and the psychological climate that encourages self-directed career behaviour. Thus, their role in supporting the competence development, and employability of their subordinates is critical. As part of the SYNCLUSIVE project, discussions with the City of Kokkola were initiated to explore ways of providing support for employees within the organisation, especially those in a vulnerable labour market position (e.g., individuals with lower educational levels). Competence development was identified as a major goal in the human resources strategy. While the organisation implemented various programs and methods for skill development, there was no guidance or support for supervisors on how to approach competence and career development within their work communities or how to provide support at the team level.
To address this gap, the supervisory coaching program "*Guiding skills and Development*" was created in the Finnish Living Lab by researchers from the FIOH. The coaching is a peer group-based, resource-building intervention aimed at strengthening supervisors' skills in supporting employees' career and competence development and on-the-job learning. The intervention was expected to enhance employees' skill development, career advancement, organisational mobility, and occupational well-being by building supervisors' resources for this work.

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Grounded in theories of social learning (Bandura, 1986) and planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), as well as cognitive stress inoculation training approach (Meichenbaum, 2007), the intervention emphasised active learning, social support, and problem-solving exercises to enhance supervisors' self-efficacy and ability in promoting employee development and to cope with challenges associated with these topics. The coaching utilised principles of coaching-based leadership and developmental leadership to foster a leadership approach that enables supervisors to encourage employees' self-directed development and provide supportive actions to guide their team members in developing their skills and competences.

The coaching program was implemented in 2025 for supervisors in the City of Kokkola. The program consisted of two three-hour modules, and the training sessions were conducted face-to-face on the premises of the participating organisation. They were facilitated by two trainers from FIOH. Three pilot programs were conducted (June, October, November 2025), and a total of 35 supervisors participated.

Supervisor context: participants from several sectors

In the City of Kokkola, The City Group consists of the city organisation, one independent public utility, 42 local authority subsidiaries, 17 associated companies, and 7 joint municipal authorities. The organisation decided to offer the training for all voluntary supervisors to maximise reach and to build consistent leadership capabilities across units. Supervisors from several different sectors, such as early childhood education, technical and environmental services, cultural services, cleaning and catering, and human resource enrolled in the training program. This cross-sector participation enabled supervisors to share ideas and knowledge about their current development practices as well as their role in promoting employee development, with colleagues from various units and occupational fields.

Many supervisors have extensive leadership experience. However, they may lack tools for providing individualised support to employees, relying instead on one-size-fits-all guidance. In addition, supervisory work is often characterised by high time pressure which creates barriers for team-level competence development. Typically, supervisors perceive workplace skill and competence development through formal development structures and practices. Therefore, increasing their knowledge and understanding of more informal, on-the-job learning practices would be highly beneficial.

1.7.3.2 CMOs for supervisory training

1) Peer learning around practical exercises improves skills and self-efficacy and leads to change in supervisory roles and practices

Mechanism

The intervention created opportunities for supervisors to engage in peer-based problem-solving. Exposure to how peers handle similar situations enabled *vicarious learning* by providing practical, real-life supervisory cases and transferable approaches to everyday challenges. The exercises deepened supervisors' *understanding of their role* in workplace learning and competence development and strengthened their *skills and self-confidence* in managing these situations.

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Outcomes

After the training, the supervisor *delegated responsibility* for competence development to subordinates and *established a development team* instead of leading the process by oneself. The supervisor also sought to integrate the learning outcomes from the training into performance and development discussions with subordinates and to further develop incentive-based remuneration practices in their unit.

Context

Supervisory work is characterised by high time pressure, and both everyday problem-solving and the acquisition of new competencies largely depend on the supervisor's own initiative. Participating supervisors viewed competence development as a central aspect of managerial work and demonstrated a development- and change-oriented mindset.

Overarching CMO

If supervisors have a development-oriented mindset and feel responsible for competence development, **then** peer learning can strengthen their skills and self-efficacy because it supports vicarious learning by incorporating practical examples and collaborative problem-solving in the context of supervisory work, **which may lead to** changes in supervisory practices by promoting employees' active role in competence development and integrating competence development more systematically into discussions with subordinates.

2) Peer learning around practical exercises broadens understanding of age-specific competencies and knowledge transfer and changes performance and development discussions

Mechanism

The training included concrete *case examples and peer discussions* focusing on how supervisors can engage with employees of different ages in competence management. Through these activities, supervisors' *mindsets were broadened*. The training supported the realisation that learning occurs in everyday work, not only in formal training contexts, and that the same approaches to competence development do not apply equally to younger and older employees. The supervisors also came to understand that employees at different career stages may not always be equally motivated or able to consistently invest energy in competence development.

Outcomes

Following the training, the supervisor designed a method to ensure the transfer of tacit knowledge from employees approaching retirement to the wider work community. The supervisor also revised the structure of the performance and development discussions to address competences and strengths more explicitly and began scheduling these discussions more systematically. Moreover, the supervisor developed a plan to monitor employees' competence development and knowledge sharing more systematically, and to link these outcomes to individual performance-based pay supplements.

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Context

The supervisor had extensive work experience in developing and managing employees' competencies.

Overarching CMO

If supervisors engage in peer learning through discussions and concrete case examples related to age-differences in competence development and knowledge sharing, **then** their mindsets regarding competence management broadens, **which may lead to** changes in supervisory practices, including more explicit attention to competencies and strengths within the work community, as well as improved transfer of tacit knowledge between employees.

3) Training combining research-based knowledge and practical exercises offers new insights and tools and refines group discussion practices

Mechanism

The training incorporated the most recent research evidence and case examples from real-life situations, which were examined collaboratively with peers. Through engagement with up-to-date research, the supervisors *gained new insights, perspectives, and tools,* which they sought to *align with their existing knowledge* and prior experience.

Outcomes

After the training, the supervisor developed a plan to implement a concrete intervention in their workplace related to competence management. Specifically, they planned to introduce a new group discussion at the workplace focusing on learning and competence management.

Context

The supervisor had positive attitude toward continuous professional development and extensive work experience in developing and managing employees' competencies. They perceived competence development as an important working-life skill.

Hindering factors

For supervisors with extensive prior experience in workplace learning and competence development, expectations for the training were initially low. However, the research-based and knowledge-oriented nature of the training proved to be particularly relevant and valuable.

Overarching CMO

If supervisors have extensive experience in managing on-the-job learning and competence development, **then** up-to-date, research-based, and practice-oriented training may provide them new insights **which may lead to** adjustments in existing routines and supervisory practices.

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4) Peer support normalizes the challenges of supervisory work and encourages greater peer interaction

Mechanism

The training provided social support and encouragement, as well as opportunities to address practical examples and challenges collaboratively within a peer group composed of supervisors from multiple sectors and professions. Peer support fostered a sense of *normalisation*, *reduced feelings of being alone and isolated and lowered the threshold for adopting practices* and experiential knowledge from others. This occurred, as supervisors recognised that similar challenges are faced across sectors.

Outcomes

After the training, the supervisor established an informal peer group consisting of colleagues from multiple sectors. This led to more frequent contact with peer supervisors and provided ongoing support for everyday supervisory work.

Context

These mechanisms appeared particularly relevant in the context of time-pressured supervisory work. Addressing everyday challenges is often a solitary task, and peers may not be readily available within one's own unit or area.

Overarching CMO

If supervisors have limited peer contact and experience their work as isolating, **then** a multi-sectoral training programme that provides peer support and reflection may help normalise the challenges and reduce feelings of isolation, **which may motivate and lead to** more frequent peer interactions in the future.

1.8 Overarching findings quantitative and qualitative analyses

1.8.1 Reflecting quantitative and qualitative results

Of the two interventions targeted at jobseekers (Taite and IPS), **Taite coaching** proved to be effective. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the quantitative findings showed that the intervention significantly strengthened participants' job search self-efficacy. Participants reported statistically significantly higher levels of job search self-efficacy immediately after the coaching programme compared to the baseline measurement. In addition, register-based data indicated that participation in the Taite coaching programme led to improved employment outcomes over a four-month follow-up period. Compared with employment changes observed among other long-term unemployed individuals, employment among Taite participants increased significantly more.
The interview data collected from participants and job coaches provided a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying both the proximal and long-term effects of the Taite intervention. Accordingly, coaching elements such as opportunities to practise real-life

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job search situations, a focus on identifying individual strengths, and the provision of positive and encouraging feedback appeared to build participants' job search skills, strengthen their positive self-perception and confidence in job seeking, and increase their effort and persistence in pursuing employment. These findings were closely aligned with the quantitative results.

The interview data also increased understanding of the benefits of the Taite coaching for jobseekers facing more challenging circumstances, such as limited motivation to find employment or health-related difficulties. Although these participants did not necessarily find employment after the coaching, the programme helped them identify alternative pathways forward, including training opportunities and subsidized employment. For these individuals, peer support and the participatory elements of the coaching increased energy and activity levels and, through a process of normalisation, reduced feelings of failure. Furthermore, among participants with an immigrant background, opportunities to practise job search situations in Finnish and receive encouraging feedback from Finnish peers reduced stress and improved their prospects of finding employment.

Based on its positive outcomes, Taite coaching will continue in Kokkola in the coming years. FIOH will train new instructors in August 2026, drawn from Employment Services and third-sector organisations. The coaching method is also expanding to other municipalities in Central Ostrobothnia through the new Taite+ project partially funded by the European Social Fund (ESF+) (see Taite coaching for jobseekers takes root in Kokkola – a proven method for helping people move forward | Finnish Institute of Occupational Health). Although Taite coaching has strengthened collaboration between implementing stakeholders, it also appears to have the strongest potential for scaling nationally and perhaps also internationally. The training materials support this implementation.

The quantitative data on **IPS coaching** were too limited to allow for a robust impact assessment. However, interviews with participating jobseekers, a job coach, and employers suggested that regular face-to-face meetings with job coaches, combined with concrete step-by-step job search tasks, increased participants' sense of ownership of the job search process. Similar to the findings for Taite coaching, efforts to identify participants' strengths and skills, together with job coaches' efforts to match jobseekers with suitable employment opportunities, appeared to improve participants' self-perceptions and confidence in their employment prospects. The IPS coaching was also seen to reduce employers' hesitation to hire long-term unemployed individuals facing various challenges. This effect was achieved through the active communication and support that job coaches provided directly to employers and workplaces. In Finland, many long-term unemployed individuals struggle with the network of multiple social benefits, and entering employment may even weaken their financial situation. For this group, the financial counselling included in the IPS coaching helped participants view employment more positively and better understand the financial implications of returning to work.

Due to a rapid increase in the number of unemployed jobseekers in the region, the Employment Services decided to discontinue the implementation of the IPS programme in autumn 2025. As the number of clients grew, it was no longer feasible to provide such personnel-intensive coaching to all those in need. However, the IPS coaching has also attracted broader interest in Finland, and it is already being piloted in some employment regions and wellbeing services counties.

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To improve **employees'** opportunities for career development and mobility, a supervisory coaching intervention was developed and implemented for supervisors working in the City of Kokkola. A quasi-experimental study design was used to examine the impact of the training on employees. According to employees' self-reports, the supervisory coaching intervention did not appear to influence their sideward or upward career mobility, nor did it affect their perceptions of competence and skill development. The relatively short follow-up period of four months and the limited sample size may have constrained the ability to detect such effects. Nevertheless, according to the survey data collected from participating **supervisors,** the coaching programme was perceived as beneficial and strengthened supervisors' confidence in supporting employees' skill and career development. The participants also felt more capable of addressing potential challenges and setbacks related to these issues. In the interviews, supervisors emphasised that peer learning through practical exercises enhanced vicarious learning and collegial problem-solving, which in turn improved their skills and self-efficacy. They further noted that these improvements could lead to positive changes in their supervisory behaviours and practices. These qualitative findings were therefore consistent with the survey results. Through the sharing of research-based knowledge and participation in practical exercises, the coaching programme was also perceived to provide new insights and tools for refining supervisory practices. For supervisors who experienced a sense of isolation in their role, the coaching helped to normalise common workplace challenges and provided opportunities to build peer networks that could continue to offer support beyond the duration of the programme.

The City of Kokkola has not indicated whether it will continue implementing the programme. However, the organisation and its culture were described to be development-oriented and the decision to invest in workplace learning and competence development was seen as strategically important, which would support its continuation. Furthermore, some HR staff familiar with the programme could act as trainers, as they participated in the pilot group. However, further implementation and dissemination require understanding and decisions from upper management and allocation of resources to both HR and supervisors as well as substitute arrangements to enable supervisors' participation. To support wider dissemination, the training manuals will be published in Finnish and English and made freely available to workplaces in autumn 2026. The relatively short duration of the training (6 hours) enhances its feasibility for workplaces. The programme also includes exercises that supervisors can apply independently within their teams (e.g., in developmental group discussions), regardless of sector, organisational size, or region. Participation in the coaching is not a prerequisite for teams to carry out these activities.

1.8.2 Impact of coalition on individual level outcomes

Because the coalition in the Finnish Living Lab played only a limited role in the co-creation and tailoring of interventions within this project, the coalition-level interviews yielded relatively little information on how the coalition context and mechanisms influenced the interventions targeted at jobseekers and employees and, consequently, their labour market entry and mobility. Instead, coalition stakeholders mainly reflected on the conditions that shaped coalition development, as well as the relationships between contextual factors, coalition mechanisms, and coalition-related outcomes, such as effective functioning and long-term sustainability of the coalition.

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Nevertheless, a well-functioning and stable coalition was perceived as a potential contributor to improving labour market participation and mobility among vulnerable groups in the region. A concrete example of successful collaboration within the coalition is the Taite coaching programme, which was jointly implemented by two regional stakeholders and is being expanded to additional stakeholders across the region in 2026–2028. This shared initiative, whose outcomes have been systematically monitored, has served as a form of social glue, strengthening trust and communication among stakeholders and fostering broader collaboration within the coalition. Ultimately, these processes have contributed to improved employment outcomes among programme participants.

Overall, the coalition interviews highlighted the importance of clear leadership, shared goals, and the exchange of information and good practices as key coalition resources. They triggered mechanisms such an improved and shared understanding of challenges and opportunities, enhanced problem-solving and resource allocation, more coordinated and proactive actions, strengthened stakeholder commitment, and encouraged innovation. In turn, these processes contribute to the effective functioning and sustainability of the coalition and may ultimately improve employment opportunities and labour market participation among vulnerable groups. Compared with jobseekers' inflow, the coalition interviews provided less information on initiatives aimed at improving employee mobility. However, the interviews revealed that information sharing, joint planning, and co-creation among stakeholders are key mechanisms that can help identify potential career pathways, develop more targeted training and professional development opportunities, and thereby promote mobility across roles both within and between organisations.

1.8.3 Maintenance and sustainability of the coalition

The coalition activated and strengthened through the project appears likely to continue beyond the project period. Several key factors support its maintenance and long-term sustainability. First, even prior to the project, the small city was characterised by strong familiarity and trust among stakeholders, as well as a well-established culture of collaboration. During the project, the emphasis on promoting regional vitality alongside employment and social inclusion increased employers' interest and engagement. Furthermore, a shared understanding of regional challenges helped stakeholders recognise that these issues could not be addressed through bilateral cooperation alone, which had previously been the dominant approach. The facilitated process, consisting of a series of workshops, enabled stakeholders to develop a jointly defined vision and common objectives for the coalition. It also supported the emergence of self-organised working groups that advanced themes identified and developed collaboratively. In addition, the employment services assumed a clearer leadership role within the coalition. However, the coalition's effectiveness is not dependent on any single actor; rather, it is grounded in collaboration, shared responsibility, and the collective expertise of participating organisations. Finally, the forthcoming coalition agreement between stakeholder organisations is expected to further strengthen the coalition's sustainability and provide a formal foundation for its continued operation beyond the project.

1.8.4 The ENGINE approach

The ENGINE model, which sought to facilitate career progression and mobility through employee upskilling and thereby create vacancies for the recruitment of unemployed

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jobseekers, was not realised in the Kokkola Living Lab. The ENGINE approach proved difficult to implement in a region characterised by an SME-dominated business sector, relatively high and increasing unemployment, insufficient labour demand, and a growing incidence of dismissals and temporary layoffs. During the economic downturn, employers focused primarily on maintaining core business operations, leaving limited incentives to invest in employee training and skills development, inclusive recruitment practices, or broader collaborative initiatives such as the coalition.

According to coalition stakeholders, the ENGINE approach was perceived as overly theoretical, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises. These organisations typically have limited opportunities for internal career progression and relatively modest competence development needs, reducing the relevance of a model based on employee mobility and upskilling. Nevertheless, the stakeholders believed that the ENGINE model could be more effectively implemented in larger organisations or at the sectoral level, if employers recognised its long-term benefits for both their own operations and the wider regional economy. Labour demand often fluctuates across workplaces and over time, and greater flexibility in workforce mobility, both between employers and between education and employment, could help to address skills mismatches and improve labour market resilience. Such developments could also strengthen workforce retention within the region. Furthermore, given the region's anticipated industrial investments and future labour demand, closer cooperation among employers could support skills development and facilitate workforce mobility if these objectives were explicitly incorporated into collaborative efforts.

The stakeholders further noted that a stronger coalition, involving larger companies at the earlier phase of the project, might have enabled the development and testing of the ENGINE model within at least one organisation. In the absence of such engagement, the employment services, as a key stakeholder in the coalition, decided to focus on activities targeted at unemployed jobseekers, allowing the project to progress towards one of its central objectives despite the limited implementation of the ENGINE model.

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SYNCLUSIVE

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Living Lab Report

Amersfoort, Netherlands

Appendix 3 to D2.1 Realist Evaluation



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1. Living Lab: Amersfoort, the Netherlands

1.1. Building a Coalition

The Dutch Living Lab was coordinated by TNO (Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research) and Tilburg University, in close collaboration with the Municipality of Amersfoort. The Living Lab focused on labour market inclusion and career development in the childcare sector. The Municipality of Amersfoort played a central role in coalition building and facilitated several coalition meetings involving regional stakeholders.

The coalition brought together representatives from the childcare sector, the Municipality of Amersfoort, the Employer Service Point (WerkgeversServicepunt), the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV), educational institutions, and labour market intermediaries. The coalition aimed to address labour shortages in the childcare sector through a combination of recruitment, training, and employee development activities. The childcare organisation involved in the Living Lab employed approximately 450 employees across 52 locations in the Amersfoort region.

In addition to the coalition activities, interviews were conducted with other childcare organisations in the region to identify sector-wide challenges and opportunities related to recruitment, retention, career development, and inclusive employment practices. These interviews provided input for the development and refinement of the Living Lab interventions, while also generating insights into factors that facilitate or hinder coalition development, regional collaboration, and the potential scaling-up of successful practices within the childcare sector.

1.2 The target group

The Dutch Living Lab focused on two target groups: migrant women seeking employment in the childcare sector and employees already working within a childcare organisation.

For jobseekers, the Living Lab targeted migrant women interested in entering the childcare sector. Although this group participated in the intervention activities aimed at developing their skills and self-efficacy in and effective entry into their (new) work in childcare, quantitative data collection proved challenging due to language barriers, varying literacy levels, resulting in difficulties completing the questionnaires. Following the baseline measurement, it was therefore decided not to continue quantitative survey data collection for this target group and to primarily rely on qualitative interviews and implementation data for the evaluation.

For employees, the Living Lab focused on career development, internal mobility, and sustainable employability. While employees were the intended beneficiaries of the intervention, they were not the primary recipients. Instead, the intervention mainly targeted supervisors and organisational practices that support employee development. This was driven by a needs analysis with supervisors and employees,

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which identified where development-related barriers existed and where opportunities remained, pointing specifically to supervisors as a lever for change. Furthermore, due to staff shortages, childcare organisations often focus heavily on inflow and recruitment, while retention receives comparatively little attention. The expected effects for employees were therefore indirect and mediated through changes in supervisory behaviour, practices and organisational support as well as through increased self efficacy of these employees to take a next step in their career.

To inform the intervention design and evaluate its implementation, both employees and supervisors participated in questionnaires and qualitative data collection activities, including interviews and a focus group. For the qualitative data collection also other representatives and stakeholders at coalition level were interviewed.
The quantitative data were collected at three measurement moments (T0, T1 and T2). Because the supervisor training was rolled out in phases across locations, employees and supervisors associated with locations that received the training later could be used as a (waiting list) control group during the evaluation.

1.3 Implementation of the intervention package

For jobseekers, the Living Lab focused on improving access to employment opportunities in the childcare sector for migrant women facing barriers to labour market participation. Through collaboration between the childcare organisation, the Municipality of Amersfoort, UWV, educational institutions, and other regional stakeholders, a tailored pathway was developed that combined recruitment, training, and workplace learning. Recruitment activities included outreach within neighbourhoods and local communities to reach women who were not always accessible through traditional recruitment channels.
The intervention aimed to lower barriers for entry into the childcare sector by combining practical work experience with training and coaching. Attention was given to learning on the job, language development, and creating accessible entry routes for individuals who did not yet meet the formal requirements for pedagogical positions. Participants could enter the sector through assistant roles and gradually develop the competencies, language skills, and qualifications needed for progression towards pedagogical positions. This pathway was seen as a stepping stone towards pedagogical positions. Through the coalition, this shortened pathway was arranged to lead either to partial certificates (deelcertificaten) or to a full diploma, allowing progression to happen gradually. In this way, the Living Lab sought to create sustainable employment opportunities for migrant women while simultaneously addressing labour shortages in childcare.
For employees, the Living Lab focused on career development, internal mobility, and employee retention. Employees themselves were not the primary recipients of the intervention. Instead, the intervention targeted supervisors, with the aim of strengthening developmental leadership and improving the support available to employees regarding learning, career development, and mobility opportunities.

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A ‘developmental leadership’ training program was developed and delivered to supervisors. The training focused on increasing awareness of employee development opportunities, strengthening developmental conversations, supporting career planning, and enhancing supervisors’ ability to stimulate learning, professional growth, and mobility among employees. In addition, the Living Lab explored broader organisational opportunities to support employee development and retention, including improvements in career development processes, visibility of development opportunities, and the organisational conditions needed to facilitate employee growth. The intervention package was developed and refined iteratively through collaboration with coalition partners and through continuous input from employees, supervisors and management collected through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. These activities not only informed the design and implementation of the intervention package, but also generated insights into organisational practices, career development pathways, and conditions for employee retention that could support future improvements within the childcare organisation and the sector more broadly.

1.4 From drivers & barriers to solutions

For jobseekers, the Living Lab focused on improving access to employment opportunities in the childcare sector. Because of the staff shortages in childcare, the focus was on migrant women. However, these migrant women were facing barriers to labour market participation, amongst which their problems with the Dutch language. Through collaboration between the childcare organisation, the Municipality of Amersfoort, UWV, educational institutions, and other regional stakeholders, a tailored pathway was developed that combined recruitment, training, and workplace learning. Recruitment activities included outreach within neighbourhoods and local communities to reach women who were not always accessible through traditional recruitment channels.

The intervention aimed to lower barriers for entry into the childcare sector by combining practical work experience with training and coaching. Particular attention was given to learning on the job, language development, and creating accessible entry routes for individuals who did not yet meet the formal requirements for pedagogical positions. Participants could enter the sector through assistant roles and gradually develop the competencies, language skills, and qualifications needed for progression towards pedagogical positions. This pathway was seen as a stepping stone towards pedagogical positions. Through the coalition, this shortened pathway was arranged to lead either to partial certificates (deelcertificaten) or to a full diploma, allowing progression to happen gradually. In this way, the Living Lab sought to create sustainable employment opportunities for migrant women while simultaneously addressing labour shortages in childcare.

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1.5 Quantitative results of the Amersfoort Living Lab

The research questions which were formulated for the quantitative part of the data collection were:

4) **Jobseekers:** To what extent do jobseekers experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, as a result of the intervention or intervention package?
5) **Employees:** To what extent do employees experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as living lab-specific outcomes, following participation in the intervention or intervention package?
6) **Mobility effects:** To what extent does the intervention package lead to changes in jobseekers' employment status and in employee mobility within organisations, such as increased employment transitions or shifts in tasks and responsibilities?

1.5.1 Analyses

Quantitative analyses were conducted for employees and supervisors. No quantitative questionnaire outcome analyses were performed for jobseekers because language barriers made the questionnaire data insufficiently reliable. The evaluation of the jobseekers in this Living Lab therefore focused on training completion, qualifications, employment and further training outcomes, complemented by qualitative interviews and evaluation data.
Changes in continuous outcomes among employees and supervisors were analysed using linear mixed models (LMMs), comparing the intervention group with the waiting-list control group. For employees, there were two measurements before the actual implementation of the organizational intervention (training of their supervisors). This

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was due to the delay in the delivery of the supervisor training. The measurement closest to the intervention was used as the pre-intervention measurement where available; otherwise, the earlier pre-intervention measurement was used. This measurement was compared with the post-intervention measurement. For the supervisors, an intermediate measurement was also included. The analytical models included time and the time × group (intervention-vs control) interaction, with modelled baseline means constrained to be equal across groups. The interaction represented the estimated intervention effect.
LMMs accommodate repeated measurements and include all available observations. The tables present observed means and standard deviations, standardized effect sizes (Cohen's d), 95% confidence intervals and p-values. Effect sizes and p-values are based on the time × group interaction.
Given the small samples and attrition at follow-up, interpretation was not based solely on statistical significance. Very small effects ($|d| < 0.20$) were interpreted as indicating no meaningful difference. Effects between 0.20 and 0.50 were discussed when their direction was theoretically or practically relevant, while larger effects ($|d| \geq 0.50$) were considered potentially meaningful. The quantitative findings should therefore be interpreted as indications of possible trends alongside the qualitative findings.

1.5.2 Responses in Amersfoort, the Netherlands

Table 1.1 presents participation in the interventions and quantitative research in the Amersfoort Living Lab.
All 29 jobseekers started the training programme; 21 completed it and eight were recorded as having dropped out.
Of the 23 supervisors recruited, 15 started and 14 completed the supervisor training. Employees did not receive the training themselves but may have been indirectly affected through their supervisors and were therefore included in the quantitative research.

Table 1.1: Participation in the interventions and quantitative research in the Amersfoort Living Lab.

	Number of people that were recruited for the training/inter-vention	**Number of people that started the training/inter-vention**	**Number of people that dropped out of the training/interv ention**	**Number of people that completed the training/ intervention**	**Number included in quantitative research (including controls)**
Jobseekers	29	29	8	21	6
Employees	NA	NA	NA	NA	138
Supervisors	23	15	1	14	23

Note. For employees, the intervention was delivered through their supervisors. The participation figures on recruitment, starting, dropout and completion are therefore not applicable at the individual employee level.

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1.5.3 Jobseekers

In the Amersfoort Living Lab, migrant women were recruited for a tailored work-based training programme aimed at facilitating entry into the childcare sector. The programme combined training with workplace learning and enabled participants to obtain a diploma or relevant certificates. Of the 29 women who started, 21 completed the programme. Eight obtained a diploma and twelve obtained relevant certificates.
Because the questionnaire data were considered insufficiently reliable, the evaluation focused on programme completion, qualifications and subsequent employment or training outcomes. Follow-up information was available for 23 participants. Of these, 21 (87%) obtained a diploma or relevant certificate, six (26%) were offered a job at the participating childcare organisation and twelve (52%) entered another training programme or work trial.

Table 1.2: Qualifications and subsequent employment or training outcomes among jobseekers with follow-up information (N = 23).

Employment status	Number in follow-up	Number	Percentage
Offered a job at the participating childcare organisation	23	6	26%
Entered another training programme or work trial	23	12	52%
Obtained a diploma or relevant certificate	23	21	87%

1.5.4. Employees

Table 1.3 presents employee characteristics by study group. The intervention and control groups were comparable in gender and years of employment, although employees in the intervention group were slightly younger and more often highly educated. Reported obstacles were generally more common in the control group, particularly limited motivation to work on one's career, health-related problems and personal circumstances.

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Table 1.3: Characteristics of employees in the intervention and control groups (N = 138).

	Intervention	**Control**
Population characteristics	**Means (SD) / Percentage (N)**	**Means (SD) / Percentage (N)**
Age	41.1 (10.5), n = 88	43.7 (17.4), n = 50
Gender (% women)	97.7% (86/88)	98.0% (49/50)
Level of education		
Basic education (secondary or lower)	3.5% (3/86)	0.0% (0/47)
Intermediate education (upper secondary education, post-secondary non-tertiary education)	64.0% (55/86)	74.5% (35/47)
Higher education (short cycle education tertiary or higher)	32.6% (28/86)	25.5% (12/47)
Years of employment	7.1 (1.8)	7.0 (2.0)
Obstacles[a]		
Lack of training and skills	10.9% (7/64)	15.2% (5/33)
Little motivation to work on my career	7.8% (5/64)	21.2% (7/33)
Problems connected to health/disability	12.5% (8/64)	27.3% (9/33)
Personal life situation (e.g., caregiving responsibilities)	17.2% (11/64)	30.3% (10/33)
Lack of a good network	9.4% (6/64)	18.2% (6/33)
Lack of financial resources	9.4% (6/64)	15.2% (5/33)
Barriers in organisation/company	20.3% (13/64)	24.2% (8/33)
Other reason	17.2% (11/64)	18.2% (6/33)

Note. Available N varied by characteristic.
[a] Obstacles were available for 64 employees in the intervention group and 33 in the control group.

Table 1.4 shows no evidence of an intervention effect on self-efficacy (d = 0.09). Career self-efficacy developed somewhat less favourably in the intervention group (d = -0.41), opposite to the expected direction, although the difference was not statistically significant. Descriptively, both outcomes declined in both groups, with a stronger decline in career self-efficacy in the intervention group.

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Table 1.4: Changes in primary outcomes among employees in the Amersfoort Living Lab.

Outcome	**T0** **N, Mean (SD)**		**T2** **Mean (SD)**		**Standardized effect size, d (95% CI)**	**p-value**
	Intervention	Control	Intervention	Control		
Self-efficacy	65, 0.67 (0.06)	41, 0.68 (0.07)	46, 0.64 (0.08)	16, 0.64 (0.08)	0.09 (-0.52; 0.71)	.768
Career self-efficacy / job progression self-efficacy	64, 0.72 (0.15)	41, 0.70 (0.15)	47, 0.61 (0.16)	18, 0.68 (0.12)	-0.41 (-0.95; 0.13)	.139

Note. Positive effect sizes indicate more favourable change in the intervention group relative to the control group.

Table 1.5 shows no evidence of an intervention effect on organisational mobility or career planning. Perceived career possibilities developed somewhat more favourably in the intervention group than in the control group (d = 0.29), although this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 1.5: Changes in secondary outcomes among employees in the Amersfoort Living Lab

Outcome	**T0** **N, Mean (SD)**		**T2** **Mean (SD)**		**Standardized effect size, d (95% CI)**	**p-value**
	Intervention	Control	Intervention	Control		
Organisational mobility	70, 0.64 (0.20)	42, 0.60 (0.22)	46, 0.53 (0.18)	16, 0.52 (0.16)	0.00 (-0.54; 0.53)	.987
Career planning	68, 0.71 (0.22)	42, 0.68 (0.24)	46, 0.64 (0.26)	16, 0.67 (0.17)	-0.15 (-0.66; 0.36)	.562
Perceived career possibilities	79, 1.47 (0.26)	45, 1.44 (0.25)	46, 1.42 (0.25)	16, 1.34 (0.29)	0.29 (-0.28; 0.87)	.314

Note. Positive effect sizes indicate more favourable change in the intervention group relative to the control group.

1.5.5 Supervisors

Of the 23 participating supervisors, five completed all three measurement waves, eight completed baseline and one follow-up measurement, five completed only the two follow-up measurements, and five participated in a single measurement wave. In total, 15 supervisors provided data at T0, 18 at T1, and 13 at T2. Participation therefore varied across measurement occasions.

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Table 1.6 presents the characteristics of the 23 participating supervisors: 12 in the intervention group and 11 in the waiting-list control group. The groups were comparable in age, and all supervisors were women. Supervisors in the control group had somewhat more often worked at the organisation for less than one year, whereas those in the intervention group had more often worked there for one to five years.

Table 1.6: Characteristics of participating supervisors (N=23).

	Intervention	**Control**
Population characteristics	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)
Age	38.3 (7.6), n = 12	38.6 (5.9), n = 11
Gender (% women)	100.0% (12/12)	100.0% (11/11)
Years employed at the organisation		
<1 year	16.7% (2/12)	36.4% (4/11)
1–5 years	33.3% (4/12)	18.2% (2/11)
5–10 years	8.3% (1/12)	9.1% (1/11)
>10 years	41.7% (5/12)	36.4% (4/11)

Table 1.7 presents supervisor capabilities and employee development support. Although none of the intervention effects were statistically significant, perceived organisational mobility opportunities (d = 0.33) and career planning and clarity (d = 0.41) developed somewhat more favourably in the intervention group. These outcomes were closely aligned with the aims of the training. No meaningful differences were found for leader self-efficacy or leadership competencies. Coordination satisfaction showed a sizeable difference in the opposite direction (d = -0.99), but this estimate was based on very few observations and had a wide confidence interval. The findings therefore provide tentative indications of favourable developments in two intervention-related outcomes but remain highly uncertain.\

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Table 1.7: Supervisor capabilities and employee development support outcomes in the Amersfoort Living Lab

Outcome	**T0** **N, Mean (SD)**		**T2** **Mean (SD)**		**Standardized effect size, d (95% CI)**	**p-value**
	Intervention	Control	Intervention	Control		
Leader self-efficacy for supporting employee development	11, 0.71 (0.08)	4, 0.82 (0.06)	5, 0.74 (0.06)	6, 0.75 (0.10)	0.12 (-1.01; 1.26)	.826
Perceived organisational mobility opportunities	11, 0.64 (0.10)	4, 0.70 (0.17)	5, 0.68 (0.10)	6, 0.64 (0.18)	0.33 (-0.74; 1.41)	.533
Career planning and career clarity	11, 0.61 (0.16)	4, 0.63 (0.17)	5, 0.68 (0.11)	6, 0.64 (0.19)	0.41 (-0.63; 1.45)	.426
Coordination satisfaction	11, 0.83 (0.06)	3, 0.92 (0.04)	7, 0.70 (0.25)	6, 0.80 (0.08)	-0.99 (-2.79; 0.82)	.274
Leadership competencies supporting employee development	11, 0.40 (0.07)	4, 0.45 (0.08)	6, 0.39 (0.05)	6, 0.40 (0.09)	-0.04 (-0.95; 0.87)	.931

Note. T0 = baseline; T2 = post-intervention follow-up. T1 was included in the linear mixed models but is not shown. Positive effect sizes indicate more favourable change in the intervention group relative to the control group.

For development conversations (Table 1.8), none of the intervention effects were statistically significant. The clearest indication of a potentially meaningful difference was found for the number of formal development conversations (d = 0.78), which increased more strongly in the intervention group. Smaller differences in the expected direction were observed for the informal conversation outcomes (d = 0.26 to 0.32). Formal conversation frequency showed a small difference in the opposite direction (d = -0.24). Given the small numbers and wide confidence intervals, these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

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Table 1.8: Development conversation practices among supervisors in the Amersfoort Living Lab.

Outcome	**T0** **N, Mean (SD)**		**T2** **Mean (SD)**		**Standardized effect size, d (95% CI)**	**p-value**
	Intervention	Control	Intervention	Control		
Formal conversation frequency	11, 2.82 (0.75)	4, 2.75 (1.26)	5, 3.20 (0.45)	6, 3.50 (0.55)	-0.24 (-1.15; 0.67)	.594
Equal access to formal conversations	11, 1.36 (0.50)	4, 1.75 (0.96)	5, 1.40 (0.55)	6, 1.50 (0.55)	0.21 (-0.71; 1.14)	.647
Number of formal conversations	11, 2.27 (2.45)	4, 0.75 (0.96)	5, 3.80 (3.03)	6, 1.67 (1.37)	0.78 (-0.25; 1.81)	.131
Informal conversation frequency	11, 5.09 (1.04)	4, 5.75 (1.26)	5, 5.40 (0.55)	6, 5.50 (1.38)	0.32 (-0.78; 1.42)	.560
Equal access to informal conversations	11, 2.00 (0.00)	4, 1.50 (0.58)	5, 1.80 (0.45)	6, 1.67 (0.52)	0.26 (-0.97; 1.49)	.675
Number of informal conversations	11, 7.64 (5.92)	4, 7.25 (7.46)	5, 9.00 (5.00)	6, 7.83 (7.06)	0.32 (-0.54; 1.18)	.457

Note. T0 = baseline; T2 = post-intervention follow-up. T1 was included in the linear mixed models but is not shown. Positive effect sizes indicate more favourable change in the intervention group relative to the control group.

Evaluation of the supervisor training

The training programme consisted of three sessions. Of the 12 supervisors in the intervention group, six attended all three sessions and six attended two.

Overall, responding supervisors evaluated the training positively. At T2, all five respondents reported greater awareness of their role and responsibilities regarding employee development. Four reported feeling better prepared to conduct development conversations and being more consciously engaged in employee development. The percentages were higher at T2 than at T1, but the small numbers and potentially different respondents mean that this should not be interpreted as evidence of change over time.

The evaluations are broadly consistent with the favourable directions observed for organisational mobility opportunities, career planning and clarity, and the number of formal development conversations. However, the quantitative estimates remain highly uncertain.

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Table 1.9: Supervisors' evaluation of the training intervention

Statement (% agree)	**T1 (n=7)**	**T2 (n=5)**
Better prepared to conduct development conversations with employees	42.9%	80.0%
More consciously engaged in employee development	71.4%	80.0%
More aware of development opportunities for childcare professionals	42.9%	60.0%
More aware of own role and responsibilities regarding employee development	71.4%	100.0%
More aware of the role of HR regarding employee development	42.9%	60.0%
More aware of the role of regional managers regarding employee development	28.6%	60.0%
Employees are more engaged in their professional development than one year ago	42.9%	60.0%

Note. Percentages represent the proportion of supervisors who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement.

1.5.6 Interpretation of the quantitative findings

Overall, the objective outcomes for jobseekers were encouraging, particularly given the barriers faced by the target group and the fact that this approach was implemented for the first time. Many participants obtained a diploma or relevant certificate, while a quarter were offered a job and half progressed to another training programme or work trial. This suggests that the programme may have improved their labour market opportunities, although the absence of a control group prevents firm conclusions. Changes in self-efficacy, skills and other questionnaire-based outcomes could not be assessed because the questionnaire data were insufficiently reliable. The Realist Evaluation findings are therefore essential for understanding how the programme contributed to the observed outcomes, how participants experienced it and which barriers remained.

Among supervisors and employees, no statistically significant intervention effects were found. The small samples and wide confidence intervals limit the certainty of the quantitative findings. Nevertheless, most supervisors evaluated the training positively and felt better prepared to conduct development conversations, more consciously engaged in employee development and more aware of their own role and of available development opportunities. The quantitative findings also provide some indications of increases in formal and informal development conversations, perceived organisational mobility opportunities and attention to employees' career planning. These outcomes correspond closely to the training's focus on conducting development conversations, identifying opportunities for new tasks, roles and training, and helping employees clarify their career goals and next steps.

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At employee level, these possible changes had not yet translated into improvements across most outcomes. The only favourable indication was for perceived career possibilities. No meaningful differences were found for self-efficacy, organisational mobility or career planning, while career self-efficacy developed in the opposite direction to that expected. The research question concerning changes in employee outcomes could therefore be answered only to a limited extent, as the findings provide little evidence of intervention effects at this stage.

No objective data were available on actual employee mobility, such as changes in jobs, tasks or responsibilities. The research question concerning employee mobility effects could therefore not yet be fully answered. It may also be too early to expect substantial mobility effects from the intervention. The pattern suggests that the intervention may first influence supervisors' awareness and development practices, while effects on employees' confidence, career behaviour and actual mobility may require more time. Such effects are also likely to depend on broader organisational efforts to strengthen the development culture and create the opportunities and conditions needed for employees to act on the support offered by supervisors. The organisation is currently working on these broader organisational conditions, meaning that their contribution may become visible over time.

Overall, the findings provide cautious indications that the interventions may have initiated relevant changes. For jobseekers, the objective outcomes suggest improved opportunities to obtain qualifications and progress towards employment or further training. For supervisors, the findings point to possible changes in awareness and development practices, although these had not yet clearly translated into employee outcomes. No firm conclusions about effectiveness can be drawn. The Realist Evaluation findings provide the main basis for understanding whether and how these changes occurred and what may be needed to achieve longer-term effects.

1.6 Realist evaluation results in Amersfoort, the Netherlands

In this section of the report, the research questions to be answered with the realist evaluation methodology are formulated both at the coalition-level as well as the individual-level. In addition, some additional research questions on the relevance of the ENGINE-approach were formulated as well:

The realist evaluation addresses the following research questions:

- **Coalition-level:**

Overarching research question: "*How do regional labour market coalitions work to stimulate upward or sideward mobility among employees facing barriers to progression and create traction for the inflow of jobseekers facing barriers to employment, for whom, and under what circumstances?"*

1. What key mechanisms drive coalition formation and functioning,

2. Which regional and national contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms, and

3. What outcomes do these coalitions produce?

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- **Individual-level:**

Overarching research question: *"How do training and development interventions work to stimulate upward mobility of vulnerable employees and labour market inflow of vulnerable jobseekers — for whom, and under what circumstances?"*

- **Employees:**

1. What key mechanisms drive interventions aimed at training and development for employees,
2. Which contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms, and
3. What outcomes do these interventions for employees generate?

- **Jobseekers:**

1. What key mechanisms drive interventions aimed at training and development for jobseekers,
2. Which contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms, and
3. What outcomes do these interventions for jobseekers generate?

- **ENGINE implementation question:** How, and to what extent, is the ENGINE approach implemented in practice across the Living Labs, and how do contextual conditions enable or constrain this implementation? In addressing this hypothesis, the evaluation examines how the ENGINE approach takes shape in different contexts through its three core principles:

1. **Coalition building** is examined by analysing how governance structures, partner composition, leadership processes, member participation, and levels of employer engagement, commitment, and group cohesion shape coalition functioning over time. These elements may function as contextual conditions or as mechanisms, depending on how they influence actors' engagement and collaborative behaviour, and thereby shape whether and how coalition processes associated with the ENGINE approach develop and are sustained.
2. **Multi-level intervention packages** are examined by analysing interventions targeting jobseekers, employees, organisations, and the regional or system level, with specific attention to the extent to which these levels are aligned and mutually reinforcing, as hypothesised in the ENGINE approach. Particular attention is paid to employee development and upskilling activities and jobseeker activation or matching activities.
3. **Co-design and co-implementation** are examined by analysing how these principles are reflected in practice, including the presence and functioning of monitoring and feedback mechanisms, stakeholder involvement in intervention development and adaptation, and opportunities for iterative learning across partners.

In the sections that follow this realist logic is applied. We first outline the data sources and the broader contextual conditions that shape both coalition functioning and participant engagement. We then examine how the coalition-level and individual-level mechanisms identified in the initial programme theory manifested in practice, and how these interacted with contextual factors to produce specific outcomes. By structuring each Living Lab analysis along the layered CMO framework, we ensure comparability

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across sites and provide a coherent basis for refining the overall programme theory and informing upscaling strategies in later phases of SYNCLUSIVE (WP3).
First, on the next page you can find an overview of the qualitative data collected for the Amersfoort Living Lab.

Table 1.10: Overview of qualitative data collected in Amersfoort, the Netherlands

Individual level: jobseeker		**Individual level: employees**		**Coalition level**	
Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing
Total amount of interviews	Total amount of interviews	Total amount of interviews	Total amount of interviews	Total amount of interviews	Total amount of interviews
6	0	12 (including supervisors of employees)	7 supervisors, 6 employees	17	15
Focus group:					
0	0	1 (6 employees)	0	0	0

1.6.1 Coalition-level general and context information

Amersfoort is one of the thirty-five Dutch labour market regions and comprises seven municipalities: Amersfoort, Baarn, Bunschoten, Leusden, Nijkerk, Soest and Woudenberg. The region has approximately 353,600 inhabitants, with the city of Amersfoort, around 163,300 inhabitants in 2025, as its centre. By Dutch standards it is average in size and centrally located, at a junction of motorways and rail connections between Amsterdam, Utrecht, Apeldoorn and Zwolle.

The population is growing, and the age structure is comparatively young for the Netherlands. Educational attainment is relatively high. The regional labour market is tight: national monitoring for 2025 and 2026 places Amersfoort among the thirteen regions where tightness is most pronounced, with shortages concentrated in care, education, childcare, technology and ICT. Project documentation estimated some 5,500 long-term unemployed on benefit in the region.

Overarching Living Lab context

Governance structure: Dutch labour market policy is decentralised: municipalities, the public employment organisation, education providers and employers each hold their own mandate and budget, and the thirty-five labour market regions coordinate rather than govern. Respondents described Amersfoort as comparatively advanced in this system, having established a regional employment center earlier than most Dutch regions. Respondents described the system as nonetheless in transition through 2025, with reorganisation under way at both administrative and operational level nationally. Two established regional instruments, the learning and work desk and the regional

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mobility team, were discontinued in January. One respondent described the effect as the previous shared working structure disappearing without anything new yet standing in its place. Under this arrangement, regional initiatives in the Netherlands generally have no default owner: whether and how they are commissioned has to be settled deliberately by the parties involved, rather than assigned by any single authority.

Existing social policies: Several national instruments bear on labour market inclusion of vulnerable groups. They differ in the actor they address: candidates/jobseekers, employers and workplaces, or regional actors. We first outline these instruments and then indicate which ones respondents referred to.

Candidates/jobseekers. Under the Participation Act, people receiving benefit can start with a trial placement, in which they keep their benefit for about two months while working at an employer. People in the national target-group register count toward the jobs agreement, which sets employment targets for people with a disability.

Employers and workplaces. Public sources describe instruments that reduce the cost and risk of hiring. These include municipal wage cost subsidy of up to 70 percent of the statutory minimum wage, a no-risk policy through the benefits agency that compensates sick pay, a wage cost benefit, and subsidy for internal or external job coaches. A second group supports learning at work, mainly the SLIM training subsidy for sectoral development pathways and the practical learning subsidy.

Regional actors. Central municipalities confirm the sector collaboration behind collective SLIM applications.

Institutional quality and effectiveness: Respondents described government institutions in general terms as slow to act, noting that decisions involving the municipality or UWV often take a long time regardless of which body is involved. A separate respondent described UWV as undergoing a reorganisation during the research period, alongside broader national reforms affecting work, income, and care. One respondent described the municipality as several separate units, each with its own mandate. This respondent also described municipal funding as often allocated reactively, with subsidies created in response to individual identified problems (for example, a subsidy for basic skills) rather than through an integrated plan. In the technical sector, one respondent reported hearing secondhand from peer coordinators that the regional Werkgeversservicepunt (WSP) had a weaker reputation among employers, associated mainly with UWV's harder to place candidates. The same respondent described UWV's internal culture as procedural and compliance driven, characterising it as box ticking.

Labour market structure: One respondent noted that Amersfoort is among the regions in the Netherlands that rely most heavily on temporary work agencies, though without specifying whether this applied to one sector or to the region's labour market

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more broadly. No respondent offered a single, sector-independent figure for the overall balance of SMEs and large employers across the region.

Within childcare specifically, one respondent described the sector as small and tight, structured more around foundations than profit-driven firms, and without an employers' organisation able to readily act or negotiate on its behalf. This respondent linked the sector's structure directly to how coalition-building efforts have to operate within it, given the absence of a single representative body to approach.

Comparing the two sectors directly (childcare, technical), the same respondent described technology as having a relatively larger share of SMEs than childcare. A separate respondent, reflecting on technology specifically, described the sector nationally as dominated by small and medium-sized firms, most without dedicated HR capacity, in contrast to the smaller number of large, better-resourced organisations found within childcare.

Economic situation: The Netherlands has one of the highest rates of labour market participation in the European Union, and the region performs above the national average on this measure, which reflects a generally strong economic position. Respondents described sector-level economics as less favourable in the two sectors this Living Lab addresses. One employer described margins in childcare as structurally thin, explaining that placing an additional assistant on every group would give away the margin the organisation depends on. In technology, respondents linked cost pressure to hiring caution rather than to the business cycle directly, describing employers as reluctant to take people on while wage and secondment costs are high. Read together, these accounts suggest that sector economics limit what employers can absorb regardless of willingness, and that this limit operates separately from the shortage described in 1.5. The wider claim that appetite for training moves with the business cycle is an inference rather than something respondents stated.

Education and training system: The Dutch vocational education system offers routes at several qualification levels, including school-based and work-based learning, with a national body accrediting employers as training locations. Respondents described provision and certification infrastructure as uneven across occupational fields. Some trades were described as having well-developed modular routes allowing shorter or partial qualifications, while others offer only a single, longer entry-level programme. Respondents treated this unevenness as a national feature of the vocational system rather than a regional one and described it as affecting which occupations are accessible to candidates who need a shorter or more flexible route into work. One respondent described the choice of sub-sector as having followed partly from where such certification infrastructure already existed. Respondents also described qualification level as affecting reach, with lower-level routes drawing on a larger pool of eligible candidates.

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Cultural attitudes toward vulnerable groups: Professionals within the Dutch employment and education system are generally positive towards labour market inclusion of vulnerable groups, reflecting the national policy consensus embodied in legislation and the job agreement for people with an occupational disability. Respondents described employer attitudes as more mixed. One coordinator described the practice as still unfamiliar to organisations and therefore somewhat discouraging simply because it was unknown, rather than as something employers objected to in principle. Respondents distinguished between more and less established target groups, noting that groups whose barriers are less familiar, such as limited language proficiency, are only slowly coming into view for employers. Respondents also described attitudes on the work floor as sensitive to how much unsupported guidance responsibility staff are asked to carry. At the same time, respondents described childcare as having a comparatively open culture of sharing practice across organisations, and one employer described the organisation as socially oriented by mission, stating that collaborating and not wanting to work alone is part of its make-up.

Other context factors: Two further national conditions are relevant. First, respondents described policy and practice as oriented mainly towards preparing and guiding candidates, with comparatively little structural support for preparing the workplaces and supervisors who receive them. Respondents identified this as a gap between placement and sustained retention. Second, regional labour market reform is proceeding nationally on a multi-year timeline, with full statutory implementation not expected before 2027. Respondents described regional initiatives in this period as operating within a governance environment that is itself still being settled.

1.6.2 Coalition-level CMO's

Coalition formation phase

1. Recruiting partners through relationships that already exist

> **IF a** new coalition has no track record and can offer no guarantees, while regional stakeholders already know one another or know each other by reputation,
>
> **THEN a** convening organisation can approach partners informally through relationships that already exist, rather than through a formal invitation,
>
> **LEADING TO partners** transfer their confidence in the person to the initiative, so that trust in an individual substitutes for trust in an institution that does not yet exist,
>
> **AS A RESULT commitment** is given quickly and without formal arrangements, and the coalition begins working before its governance is settled.

Respondents described the region as small enough that reputation travels ahead of formal contact. The public employment organisation has brought an existing

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relationship with the first childcare employer into the coalition, so that the very first conversation was not a cold approach but a continuation of contact that already existed. One respondent, reflecting on why the first trajectory could move quickly, explained that although this was the first direct contact with the specific person now involved, her name was already known there, and this created a form of trust before any coalition structure existed. The mechanism would therefore substitute something the coalition does not yet have, an institutional track record, with something a partner already has, a personal or organisational reputation. This looks efficient at the start, since it removes the need to build credibility from nothing, but it also sets up the stalling described two patterns further on, and the same account shows why: the respondent noted that liking someone personally does not by itself make clear who is responsible for what, so relational trust may open the door to collaboration without settling how that collaboration is governed once inside.

Hindering context factors

1. **Collaboration carried by individuals rather than by organisations.** Respondents describe collaboration in this region as running on personal relationships rather than on formal agreements between organisations. That makes things quick to start, but it also means the trust belongs to individuals and does not transfer when one of them moves on. The departure of one central figure here was followed by a period participants described as stagnation.
2. **Parties you need who are each other's competitors.** Where two organisations of the same kind are both needed, an informal approach through relationships does not resolve which of them to work with. The programme lead described getting a coalition together as feasible in principle, but said it sometimes feels as though you have to choose between education institutions. Bringing them together instead requires taking the conversation up to board level, which in turn means going up to board level inside his own organisation first. Asked what that costs, his answer was simply time.
3. **Employers already fielding more initiatives than they can tell apart.** A relational approach does not help where the obstacle is volume rather than unfamiliarity. A respondent working nationally described employers declining at the outset because it feels like the twenty-fifth initiative, adding that there are so many projects, pilots and ideas that people stop seeing the wood for the trees.

Facilitating context factors

1. **A region small enough that reputation arrives before contact does.** Partners are within one or two steps of each other, so an approach tends to arrive with a reputation already attached. That lets a partner form a judgement about whether to engage before there is any formal proposition to assess.
2. **Partners who already hold working relationships with employers.** Some partners have had standing relationships with employers before the coalition existed. This lets the coalition draw on those relationships from the outset, rather than spending its first year establishing contact and credibility with each employer itself.

Associated outcomes

1. **Early commitment from partners,** willing to explore further together.

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2. **A working relationship between three parties established quickly,** on an informal division of tasks.

2. Framing the staffing shortage as a problem shared across the sector

> **IF** there is a labour shortage severe enough that employers cannot fill their vacancies through their own recruitment,
>
> **THEN** a municipality or sector body can approach regional stakeholders and present the shortage as a problem shared across the sector rather than as each organisation's own recruitment difficulty,
>
> **LEADING TO** stakeholders conclude that the problem is larger than any of them can solve alone and that acting together is worth the uncertainty,
>
> **AS A RESULT** a first group of stakeholders commits to exploring a regional coalition.

Respondents described the shortage as a concrete and pressing issue, with one childcare provider facing the prospect of closing locations for want of staff. The municipal coordinator introduced the shortage using the image of an oil stain, a solution that spreads outward from one organisation to the next, which has given partners a shared vocabulary for an interest they had until then experienced separately. The employer who joined first described recognising the coalition's aim as consistent with how the organisation already saw itself, being explicitly a socially engaged provider that does not want to work alone. This suggests the mechanism may work less by adding new information about the shortage, which employers already knew, and more by converting a private difficulty into a shared one that justifies joint investment. The reasoning step would are the move from "this is my problem" to "this is our problem and therefore worth addressing together", and it depends on the frame resonating with how an organisation already understands its own mission.

Hindering context factors

1. **A shortage severe enough to remove the time needed to act on it.** A labour shortage cuts both ways here. It gives employers a reason to act, but it also means the person who would attend coalition meetings tends to be fully occupied covering shifts. the worse the shortage, the stronger the reason to join and the less time there is to do so.
2. **An instrument that has no concrete form yet.** Where the scheme a coalition is built around has not yet been published, willingness cannot be converted into a proposition a partner can weigh and so remains at the level of intention.
3. **Sub-sectors that differ too much for one sector-wide approach to fit.** Respondents working across regions suggest whole sectors are rarely in the same position. "Childcare" or "technology" each contain very different kinds of organisation: some parts are well organised through their own trade bodies and move quickly; others consist mostly of small firms with no such support. An invitation addressed to a sector as a whole may therefore speak to none of these situations precisely enough for any of them to recognise their own problem in it.

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Facilitating context factors

1. **A shortage that is visible in concrete terms.** A provider facing the prospect of closing locations is something other employers can picture happening to them, in a way regional vacancy figures do not. Where employers recognise their own likely future in another organisation's situation, they are more willing to treat it as a shared problem than as that organisation's bad luck.
2. **Providers that already describe themselves in terms of a social purpose.** One employer described her organisation as an explicitly socially engaged provider that does not want to solve problems alone. For organisations of that kind, joining an initiative about employing people from vulnerable groups confirms an identity they already hold rather than asking them to adopt a new one, which may be why agreeing to take part costs them relatively little internally.
3. **Access to data on the regional labour market.** Access to labour market data proved insight into the regional labour market and helped the coalition identify where labour shortages existed and which sectors and employers had vacancies the most. A respondent working nationally highlighted the value of having this information available when deciding which employers to approach. Having such data available helped framing the problem as shared in more concrete terms.

Associated outcomes

1. **Early commitment from an initial core group,** and the motivation to explore a first joint trajectory without a long preparatory phase.
2. **A positive attitude towards coalition participation** among the employers first approached.

3. Stalling where commissioning and mandate are left unassigned

> **IF** a coalition has formed informally through existing relationships, so that no commissioning body has been assigned, no project plan exists, and partners are represented by staff with operational responsibilities rather than authority to commit,
>
> **THEN meetings** continue to take place, but there is no route from something agreed in a meeting to action taken by the organisations behind the table,
>
> **LEADING TO participants** reason that they are structurally under-authorised, able to consult but not to decide, and increasingly doubting whether further investment of their time is worthwhile,
>
> **AS A RESULT progress** stalls, and involvement erodes among the partners who cannot proceed.
>
> **CONVERSELY** this same stalling is what makes the correction possible. Respondents describe the visible cost of the standstill as what legitimated appointing a coordinator and designating a commissioner, which is the pattern that follows.

This is the direct consequence of the informal start described in the previous pattern, and respondents describe it as the most consistently reported barrier of the forming

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phase. Because the coalition had come together through personal relationships rather than through formal agreement, the arrangements that would ordinarily be settled at the outset were not made. One respondent described the period as feeling as though things were merely ticking over, saying that conversations were being held but that they had no sense these would lead to a next step. After a key person left, the same respondent described it more sharply, saying that although they were certainly doing things, it felt as though nothing was actually being done, and that it had stagnated. A respondent looking back on the same period identified what had been missing in project-management terms: there was no clear project plan, governance was not in order, and a number of things an experienced project manager would have arranged at the front end simply had not been taken care of/arranged. The programme lead described his own position during this time as having no clear commissioning brief and no clearly designated commissioner, whether at official or at political level, which he linked directly to finding it harder to get a place at the regional tables where the work would have to be taken forward. What makes this more than an ordinary delay is that the consequence was not disagreement but paralysis: partners could discuss and explore, but nothing discussed became binding, so involvement gradually eroded, at the education partner and the public employment organisation in particular. Respondents also describe a second-order effect, in that unspoken tension accumulated because it was unclear who could raise a difficulty and when. One participant reflected that he had not named a problem in time, which he suggested let things simmer and created friction between people that would have been easier to resolve had it been raised earlier.

Hindering context factors

1. **Trust that was vested in individuals rather than in arrangements.** Because the coalition started through personal relationships, as described in the previous pattern, the departure of one central figure has removed what was holding the work together, and respondents describe the period immediately afterwards as stagnation.
2. **A regional layer with no hierarchy, where authority stays with each member.** The Dutch labour market is marked by a flat hierarchy, so no coalition member alone can decide the course. Where partners send operational staff, those representatives cannot bind their own organisation, and on respondents' accounts agreement reached in the room does not then become action.
3. **A central instrument that had no concrete form yet.** During this same period the national scheme the coalition was built around had not been published, so respondents have had nothing definite to put in front of partners. This has compounded the stalling: there was neither the authority to decide nor anything specific to decide about.
4. **No occasion set aside for discussing the collaboration itself.** A coalition needs moments for talking about how the work is going, separately from the substance of the work. Where no such occasion exists, it is unclear who may raise a difficulty and when, so friction is left unspoken and accumulates. Respondents described unspoken tension as harder to resolve later than it would have been at the time.

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Facilitating context factors

1. **A partner with experience of running coalitions, who can lead the conversation about the collaboration itself.** What was missing was not goodwill but someone used to this kind of work. One respondent said plainly that these projects had not been run with an experienced project manager, and that a number of things such a person would have arranged at the front end simply had not been. Because someone with that background stepped in as quartermaster, the coalition could be taken apart and put back together deliberately. She describes arriving at a point where nothing concrete was happening and everyone felt responsible while nobody felt responsible for creating movement. What this kind of partner brings is less the substantive work than the ability to hold a conversation about how the collaboration is running, which is what nobody had been positioned to do.

Associated outcomes

1. **No decisions translated into action,** and stalling progress during the forming phase.
2. **Eroding involvement** reported at the education partner and the public employment organisation in particular.
3. **A negative outcome that has generated its own correction.** Respondents describe the visible cost of this period as what legitimated the structural intervention described in the next pattern. it is the clearest instance in the dataset of a failure producing the conditions for its own repair, which may be worth noting for regions tempted to read an early standstill purely as a setback.

4. Assigning a coordinator and recording roles and mandates is needed for progressing the formation of a coalition that works

> **IF** the organisations in a coalition each retain their own decision-making authority and are represented by staff without a mandate to commit,
>
> **THEN** the coalition can appoint a coordinator acting as a facilitating leader, and record roles, tasks and responsibilities in writing,
>
> **LEADING TO** participants understand what they are authorised to decide, and consequently dare to raise problems and take initiative without first seeking reassurance,
>
> **AS A RESULT** deliberation converts into decisions and the coalition will be/is able to act on behalf of its members.
>
> **CONVERSELY** where commissioning and mandate remain unassigned, participants can consult but not commit, so meetings do not produce action, progress stalls, and involvement erodes among partners who cannot proceed.

This is the correction to the stalling described in the previous pattern, and the most consistently reported pattern in the dataset. It operates in both directions depending on whether governance is settled. During the forming stage, coalition partners were represented by staff with day-to-day operational responsibilities rather than by people who could commit their organisation to anything. Meetings were held, but there was

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no agreed commissioner, no project plan, and no route from a decision made in a meeting to action taken by the organisations behind the table. One participant described this retrospectively, saying that they had started working before the project-management basics were arranged, and that an experienced project manager would ordinarily have settled this in advance. The consequence does not have been disagreement but paralysis: partners could discuss and explore, but nothing discussed became binding, so involvement gradually eroded, at the education partner and the public employment organisation in particular. The correction was the appointment of a quartermaster with project management experience and the placement of the coalition under a designated commissioner, after which tasks, roles and responsibilities were written down and agreed. Once this was in place, the same coordinator who had previously felt unable to act described now feeling authorised to give feedback when something was not working, and to initiate contact with new partners without waiting for permission. The underlying logic would are that a mandate is not simply a formality: without it, no one in the room can commit to anything on behalf of their organisation, and with it, ordinary participants can raise problems and take initiative rather than only attend.

Hindering context factors

1. **Work beginning before any project plan exists.** This coalition has begun without a project plan. Questions an experienced project manager would settle at the very start, such as who delivers what by when, were left open, and were only answered after a standstill made continuing without answers impossible. (Policy and institutions)
2. **Employers with limited tolerance for governance architecture.** A respondent working nationally suggested employers are not often waiting for governance structures. That sets a ceiling on how much structure a coalition can build before partners disengage, which suggests what matters is that decision rights are clear rather than that the arrangement is elaborate.

Facilitating context factors

1. **A coordinator appointed from outside the existing relationships.** Such a coordinator has no stake in how tasks were divided previously. Steering on milestones, planning and division of roles has introduced a discipline the informal arrangement had not produced. (Policy and institutions)
2. **A coordinator not held to short-term delivery targets.** The coordinating role was briefed to build recognition and lay groundwork rather than to be judged on placement numbers. Since that early work produces no quick results, it that a coordinator judged on numbers would have skipped it in favour of quick wins. (Policy and institutions)
3. **A facilitative rather than directive leadership style.** The role in this coalition has worked best where the coordinator proposed a way forward for the group to accept or amend, rather than deciding alone and issuing instructions. Partners have needed to experience the mandate as organising their own commitment, not as being managed from above. (History of collaboration)

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Associated outcomes

- **Before the correction:** no decisions translated into action, and eroding involvement at the education partner and the public employment organisation.
- **After the appointed coordinator took charge:** more effective meetings and a clearer division of tasks are reported, with the coordinator initiating collaborations that had previously felt out of reach.
- **The confidence generated** becomes the condition on which several later patterns in this document depend.

5. Turning intentions into something partners can examine

> **IF** partners are asked to invest time in an initiative whose product, timing and conditions are not yet concrete, and whose meetings produce no decisions,
>
> **THEN** the coalition converts intention into something that can be examined: a published instrument, decisions with named owners, next steps with dates, and visible movement between meetings,
>
> **LEADING TO** partners appearing able to weigh what participation costs against what they can see it producing, and to conclude that the coalition does what it says,
>
> **AS A RESULT** stated willingness converts into commitment.
>
> **CONVERSELY** where meetings recur without decisions, deadlines or a tangible product, partners conclude that the return does not justify the time, and engagement erodes towards what one participant called another talking group that people decline to join.

Before the regional training routes were published, the municipal coordinator has had nothing in hand when talking to potential partners: no description of what the arrangement would actually involve, so there was nothing for a partner to react to or weigh up. The regional training routes are the sectoral development pathways approved nationally. They list the functions in a sector and the training available for each, for jobseekers, career changers, and existing staff. The coordinator holds this task for all sectors in the region, so this account concerns the pathways in general and not one coalition, and it dates from the forming phase. The coordinator described that period as talking about thin air and having to sell that thin air. Once a website went live listing the available training routes and job profiles and letting an organisation check what fitted its own situation, conversations with employers changed: there was now something to point to, which the coordinator described as making the plan a living thing rather than a concept. A respondent working nationally named what this kind of concreteness may do for an employer in particular: employers build their own plans and business cases on an arrangement, so they need to know whether it will still be there in a year, not only what it currently offers. The same distinction may also help explain why moving faster, later in the process, did not put employers off. One coordinator described no longer feeling like someone trying to sell something at that

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point, adding that the trust built up over the preceding meetings was what let the coalition sell something afterwards without it landing as pressure.

Hindering context factors

1. **Dependence on a national ministry for the instrument itself.** The pathway's content, funding and mandate were set by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment rather than by the coalition. Two respondents independently described this as disruptive: one for how unevenly funding and formal assignment was distributed across regions, the other for how slowly and unpredictably information reached the coalition.
2. **Instruments whose conditions are still being revised.** Where a national scheme is still being amended, no one in the coalition can state what participation will yield or when funding becomes available and on what terms.

Facilitating context factors

1. **A published scheme partners can finally assess.** Once the national training routes were published, with the available job profiles and courses set out, partners have had something specific to assess against their own situation. On the accounts given, this is what turns general willingness into a decision an organisation can actually take.
2. **Employers needing to know an arrangement will still exist next year.** Employers build their own staffing plans and business cases around what they commit to. A respondent working nationally put it plainly: where a coalition looks erratic, an employer asks what they are supposed to get out of it and may discount it regardless of its content.
3. **Trust already accumulated through earlier contact.** Publishing something concrete turns willingness into a firm commitment only if partners read it as the coalition delivering what it promised rather than as pressure to decide. That reading depends on clear governance and on the regular contact described under coalition maintenance below.

Associated outcomes

1. **Movement towards a declaration of intent,** reported at the last interview round as close but not yet settled.
2. **In the forming stage, by contrast:** partners reported as informed but uncommitted, and frustration among those unable to proceed with employers.

6. Absorbing coordinating work so that participation depends less on spare staff capacity of employers

> **IF** taking part in a coalition carries coordinating work for employers, in the form of meetings to attend, several public bodies to deal with and paperwork to complete such as subsidy applications, and organisations differ in whether anyone's role allows them to take that work on,
>
> **THEN** a partner of the coalition can take that work on itself rather than passing it across: one point of contact instead of several, subsidy applications completed on the employer's behalf rather than the requirements being explained and the work left

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with them, meeting formats and timing that fit operational reality, and a scale of participation matched to what each organisation can carry,

LEADING TO employers judge participation as more feasible in the currency they are actually short of, which is time and attention rather than goodwill,

AS A RESULT participation and follow-through are less likely to concentrate among the organisations that happen to have staff for this kind of work.

CONVERSELY where nobody absorbs this work, managers at larger organisations can reason that a colleague with a dedicated function can pick it up, while managers at small organisations reason that they have other things to do and let the opportunity lapse, even where they consider it worthwhile.

Time was the reason most often given by organisations that did not attach to the coalition. A respondent working nationally identified two forms the burden takes and described both as affecting employers generally rather than small ones specifically. Employers are approached separately by several public bodies about related matters: she described one dealing with three account managers, two work coaches and someone from the vocational qualifications body, and said it drives them mad. Administrative requirements, on her account, can also consume more time than the benefit is worth. What she proposed in response was an integrated approach in which an employer deals with one interlocutor, and practical help with the paperwork rather than instruction about it. Organisation size then determines how hard this lands. A coalition partner described the difference in these terms: at a smaller organisation the manager is “much more for everything” and therefore genuinely has no time, whereas at a larger organisation responsibilities are distributed and people do have that time. The concrete contrast given was that a small childcare provider must arrange everything, while a large one has one person for payroll and another for personnel matters. A childcare employer described this happening in her own case, unprompted: she had identified a candidate she wanted to support into the sector, knew a subsidy scheme probably applied, and still did not act, saying that she then thinks she has other things to do, so it does not get done, while it would of course be helpful and would fill a place where there are real shortages. Coalition actors present confirmed how often this happens, noting how frequently employers do not apply for a subsidy because it is too much hassle, and that small employers are often unaware which schemes exist at all. This suggests the constraint may not be willingness or awareness of value, but the absence of anyone whose role permits them to convert intention into action.

Hindering context factors

1. **Public bodies that each keep their own line to the employer.** A coalition would only be able to offer one point of contact if the other public organisations involved were willing to route through it. Where each retains its own account manager and to approach the employer directly, as respondents describe, the coalition may be unable to deliver the single interlocutor it is offering, however much it takes on itself. That the remedy

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proposed by a respondent working nationally was explicitly an integrated approach suggests the obstacle may lie in coordination between public bodies rather than in any one of them.

2. **Administrative requirements set nationally, which the coalition can carry but not reduce.** A coalition can complete an application on an employer's behalf but cannot change what a scheme demands or when it opens. There may therefore be a floor below which the burden cannot be absorbed, and where requirements sit above what the benefit is worth, small organisations might still decline.
3. **A binding constraint that may be money rather than time.** Absorbing coordination addresses the time cost of taking part, but not the cost of supervision on the floor. Margins in childcare are described as thin across the sector, and the cost of an extra supervising member of staff is not covered by what a group brings in. Where the real barrier is financial rather than administrative, this resource does not reach it, which may be part of why arrangements of this kind sustainable during a funded pilot but less so afterwards.
4. **The coalition's own coordinating capacity resting on time-limited funding.** Taking work off employers presumably requires someone paid to do it. A respondent working across regions identified whether money was freed up for someone to spend days on this as the clearest difference between regions that progress and regions that stall, which suggests this mechanism may itself be vulnerable to the funding conditions described elsewhere in this document.

Facilitating context factors

1. **An organisation whose formal role is serving employers.** The region already has an organisation whose formal role is advising and supporting employers rather than regulating or funding them; its adviser described her own remit as being there for the employer. Taking coordinating work off employers would therefore be part of that organisation's job rather than an additional burden someone has to be talked into carrying.
2. **Administrative expertise already sitting with that organisation.** That same organisation deals with the relevant funding schemes routinely and, knows how the paperwork works. That expertise is what makes it possible to complete applications on an employer's behalf, rather than explaining the requirements and leaving the work with them.
3. **A sector mixing a few large providers with many small ones.** The local childcare sector consists of a few larger providers alongside many small ones. That variation makes it possible to ask different things of different organisations: a small employer can take one candidate where a larger one can take a group. Asking the same of both might either overwhelm the small provider or waste the larger one's capacity.

Associated outcomes

1. **Commitment reported from a wider base of organisations.** smaller organisations often struggle with the administrative and coordinating burden of initiatives, and that where a partner can help by taking over this role, they are more willing to participate.
2. **Participation and follow-through nonetheless still concentrated** among the larger organisations during the formation phase, which suggests any effect so far may be partial.

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Coalition maintenance phase

1. **Convening competitors around a shared problem, repeatedly and with the same people, under a supportive facilitator**

> **IF** the organisations a coalition needs compete with one another for the same staff and have no shared setting outside that competition,
>
> **THEN** they are brought together at regular intervals, hosted in turn on each other's premises, by a party they experience as being there for them rather than as an authority over them,
>
> **LEADING TO** participants judge the setting safe enough to say what is not working as well as what is,
>
> **AS A RESULT** a group forms that exchanges experience openly and keeps contact outside the meetings.

Every three months, the group of childcare employers met at a different employer's own location. Whoever was hosting gave a short welcome and a tour of their own building, after which the public employment adviser running the coalition took the agenda back over for the discussion itself. At the first meetings participants were guarded: one described the room as full of what she called "non-colleagues", a mix of competitor and colleague, sizing each other up. What changed that, in her account, was two things repeating together over several quarters rather than any single meeting: the same people kept showing up, and it was consistently the same adviser, someone whose job title is literally adviser for employers, who ran the room rather than the municipality or an inspector. During the tours something specific has happened. One employer would see how another had laid out a room or organised a shift and say so out loud, which has given people an opening to talk shop that the formal agenda did not. Over several quarters, employers started volunteering what had gone wrong for them and not only what had gone well, went into more personal territory in side conversations, and thanked the organisers unprompted for setting the meetings up at all. One employer had by then offered to host the next round.

Hindering context factors

1. **Competition for the same scarce staff.** The childcare providers in this coalition compete with each other for the same people, which made the first meetings a matter of mutual probing rather than exchange. Stronger competitive feelings among partners requires spending additional time working out these possible frictions.
2. **Organisations sending a different representative each time.** Where the person attending changes, familiarity does not accumulate, since it builds between individual people rather than between organisations. Each new face returns the group some way towards the guarded stage it started in.

Facilitating context factors

1. **The same individuals returning over several quarters.** In this coalition the employers met every three months, and one participant attributed the change in atmosphere not to how often they met but to the fact that the same faces kept returning.

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2. **The convening organisation's existing standing with employers.** Employers accept an organisation they see as existing to support them more readily than one they associate with inspection, funding conditions or enforcement, even where the content of the meeting would be identical.
3. **A rotating venue with a tour of the host's own premises.** Seeing how another organisation actually works produces a familiarity that a meeting room does not, and to prompt comparisons a verbal description would not.
4. **A sector already used to share practice across organisations.** One participant described the sessions as genuinely participative, with providers sharing information honestly. That existing habit is part of what makes candid exchange possible once the setting feels safe enough.
5. **A mix of larger and smaller providers in the room.** Where every organisation present faces identical circumstances there is little to learn from each other, so differences in size and working method are what make attending worthwhile.

Associated outcomes

1. **A reported shift from probing to open exchange,** with failures shared alongside successes.
2. **Contact between employers outside the meetings,** which participants described as new.
3. **Knowledge exchange that individual organisations cannot produce alone.** One employer said she found the sessions fascinating precisely because almost all the other organisations present were very small and looked at childcare, training and the labour market in a completely different way, and that she would not have wanted to miss this. Another respondent described the value as a sparring function, where one organisation can say it has been through the same thing and explain how it handled it. This suggests the coalition may add something bilateral relationships between two parties would not produce, although whether it actually improves recruitment and guidance practice has not been measured.

2. Making explicit who brings what, wants what, and is responsible for what, and recording it

IF participation is non-binding and what each partner actually expects to contribute, gain and be responsible for has never been said out loud, so that different partners may be assuming different things without anyone finding out until something goes wrong,

THEN the coalition works through, with each partner directly, what it wants from participation, what it can offer in return, and where its own responsibility starts and stops, and sets this down in a document the partners formulate together and sign,

LEADING TO partners recognise themselves specifically in the arrangement rather than only a shared goal stated in general terms, and being able to hold each other, and themselves, to what was actually agreed,

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> **AS A RESULT** commitment becomes explicit and reciprocal, something partners can be held to, rather than an assumed and open-ended goodwill.
>
> **CONVERSELY** where roles and contributions stay implicit, partners project their own expectations onto the collective without anyone confirming them, responsibility for follow-through has no clear owner, and a document signed on top of that would record an intention no one has actually tested.

One participant's own definition of what makes a coalition work at all starts from exactly this point. In that account a coalition means give and take on both sides, ***real reciprocity***, and ***an arrangement*** in which all partners contribute to the coalition. A partner that only receives from the coalition and contributes nothing in return causes the arrangement to stop working. Part of what that means is representation done properly: knowing who else you are speaking for, not only your own interest, and being able to hold each other to what was agreed, calling it out when something is not followed through and naming it when something works well. A second participant made a related point from the coordinating side, describing a specific failure to avoid: if a coalition designs something on employers' behalf instead of asking them to work out the actual demand together first, no single employer ends up feeling it is theirs to follow through on, because the question was never actually theirs to begin with. In the childcare coalition this has played out concretely. Rather than the coalition deciding what roles it thought employers needed, employers were asked to work through together the actual job descriptions the new roles would have to fill, and only then to put a joint signature under the result. A third participant explained why that signature may not be symbolic: once an organisation has co-signed a job description, it cannot later say it has no room for someone who fits it. Getting to that point has taken real preparation. The group sessions where roles and contributions were worked out were each preceded by one-to-one conversations with individual employers, which participants said was what let each employer trust that the collective version would still reflect what they had personally said.

Hindering context factors

1. **Divergent organisational interests.** Partners share an overall aim but differ in what each hope to get from it. Education and employers are the clearest example. A coalition partner described education as treating qualification as the aim, whereas employers see education as a means to get people into work. In the first childcare pilot, the employer wanted a skilled employee and the school wanted a diploma, and both found out only halfway through. Differences like these make the conversation more delicate and make explicit articulation of contributions more necessary.
2. **Membership that carries no conditions.** An organisation that contributes actively and one that merely attends have the same standing, so when a partner does not follow through there is no agreed expectation anyone can point to.
3. **Written declarations meaning different things to public bodies and to employers.** Written declarations are a familiar instrument in the public sector and a less familiar one for employers, whose commitments are usually commercial and specific. The same

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document may therefore be read by a public body as a statement of intent and by an employer as an obligation it is not certain it can honour.

Facilitating context factors

1. **A direct one-to-one relationship with each employer.** The coalition already to hold a separate relationship with each employer, which is what makes it possible to prepare a collective step through individual conversations beforehand.
2. **Accountability already settled.** Organisations unlikely to sign up to obligations towards a group while it is still unclear who in that group decides what, or who is accountable if things go wrong. Settling mandates and commissioning, described earlier in this document, would therefore come first.
3. **Earlier joint work that partners can point to.** The coalition has earlier joint work partners can refer to, which may give a new commitment a precedent so that signing up reads as continuing something already under way.
4. **Several comparable providers facing the same shortage.** The sector locally contains several providers of comparable size in the same position, which is what makes a collective arrangement possible at all rather than a bilateral deal with one employer.

Associated outcomes

1. **Joint drafting draw out honest disagreement.** One respondent described shared ownership as still uneven going in but said that as soon as something genuinely became a joint document, people spoke up rather than staying quiet, which is what let the result end up actually shared rather than shared in name only.
2. **Reported movement towards a declaration of intent,** which if signed would are the first anchoring of the coalition outside the project logic. It was unsigned at the last interview, so the reasoning attributed to employers is in part inferred from coordinators' accounts.
3. **For the target group:** making the collective decision explicit converts it into a concrete operational consequence. Once the group has agreed and signed off on placing a certain kind of candidate, an individual organisation can no longer say it has no room for one. This is the most direct route visible in the data from a coalition-level agreement to actual access for the target group.

3) Comparable examples and reciprocity deepen trust and move individual interest toward shared commitment

> **IF** the organisations that would have to adopt a practice hesitate not because they are against it, but because it is new territory they have no experience with, and the group already trusts each other enough to take one another's experiences seriously,
>
> **THEN** concrete examples of comparable organisations that have already done it are put in front of them at every meeting as an opening for discussion, and the coalition consistently asks what it can offer employers in return, not only what employers can contribute,

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> **LEADING TO** participants feel that a genuine, two-way relationship is accumulating rather than a one-sided ask, which lets the practice itself start to look feasible for organisations like theirs rather than exceptional,
>
> **AS A RESULT** individual interest turns into something the whole group visibly stands behind and is willing to act on together.

The approach was deliberately gradual and concrete and has built on more than information alone. At every meeting the coordinator brought a specific practical example, a training route that had actually run at a comparable organisation elsewhere with a named result, alongside the vocational school and the sector body so they could discuss on the spot how something similar might work locally. The question put to the group was always the same and always open, namely whether this is what they want, rather than a proposal to sign off on. The coordinator described the meetings as doing a second thing at the same time: each one let trust grow and let the coalition show it gave something back, not only asked what employers could bring. She described this as planting a positive seed and giving it time to grow, until the idea started to live inside the organisation itself and not only in the room. She was explicit that this patience was necessary because the subject was still unfamiliar and somewhat discouraging to act on alone and contrasted it with a different situation in which a topic is already familiar and employers are actively asking for movement, where winning trust depends on acting decisively and following up quickly rather than on patience. In this case the gradual approach eventually produced a moment the coordinator described directly: enough employers had signalled willingness that continuing to ask, quarter after quarter, whether they wanted to proceed no longer made sense, so the coalition moved to visible next steps that the whole group did stand behind.

Hindering context factors

1. **Hesitation that comes from unfamiliarity rather than objection.** Childcare employers here do not be opposed in principle to recruiting people with limited work experience or limited Dutch; most simply never to have done it. If the obstacle is unfamiliarity, it would follow that a single presentation does not shift it, and the pattern here suggests repeated exposure over a long period does while argument does not.
2. **Absence of cohesion in the group.** Without an established basis of trust, peer examples liable to be received skeptically rather than taken as relevant.
3. **A relationship that runs in one direction only.** The coordinator attributed employers' trust to two things together: what the coalition gives back to them, and what it does on the demand side on their behalf. Where a coalition only ever asks, that basis absent and peer examples may land as another request.

Facilitating context factors

1. **Examples recognisably similar to the employer looking at them.** An employer weighing something they have never done is asking whether it is feasible for an organisation of their size, in their sector, with their staffing. A case from a comparable childcare provider answers that question in a way an impressive example from a different sector does not.

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2. **A recurring meeting that already existed.** A regular meeting of these childcare employers was already in place, held every three months. That matters because showing examples works only through repetition over many months, and without a meeting that recurs there would be no occasion at which to do it more than once.
3. **Comparable providers elsewhere who have already done this.** Childcare providers elsewhere in the country have already run training routes of this kind, so real examples with named results exist to bring to each meeting. A respondent working nationally suggested an example from within the group itself would be more persuasive still.

Associated outcomes

1. **Individual employers moving from reserve** to actively asking the coalition to return with proposals.
2. **That individual willingness converging** into a moment where the coalition judged the whole group ready to act together, rather than continuing to ask quarter after quarter.
3. **A caveat respondents' accounts cannot settle:** whether this reflects genuinely changed attitudes, or greater visibility of employers who were already interested, cannot be established without interviewing employers directly.

4. Providing a setting in which education and employers can question each other directly

> **IF** education providers and employers operate from structurally different institutional logics, with education assessed primarily on qualifications awarded and employers on whether someone can do the job, and they do not meet systematically without an intermediary,
>
> **THEN** the coalition organises sessions at which both are present, supported by a shared document stating aims and by a coordinator who translates between the two logics,
>
> **LEADING TO** each side appearing able to question the other's logic directly and to recognise a complementarity neither has seen alone,
>
> **AS A RESULT** a working connection forms between two systems that respondents suggest would otherwise not align structurally.

Respondents described the difficulty between education and employers as long-standing and rooted in genuinely opposing interests rather than in poor communication. One put it as needing education and employers to be facing the same way so that the employment side can do its own work at all, and said that in practice, for as long as she has known the field, it has been complicated for the two to work together. The practical expression of the gap is mutual invisibility. The same respondent described schools not knowing how to reach candidates while employers do not know how to reach them either and added that once a student is placed there is sometimes an email at the start and then nobody from the school for the next three months. Another respondent described the coalition as giving direction where practice had varied by organisation, with one provider doing it one way and another differently. A third described the coalition making it possible to prepare in advance, saying she

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wants to work with the workplace supervisors only once it is known who is coming, so that preparation is possible. what the coalition supplies here is primarily the setting rather than the message: a place where two systems that otherwise deal with each other only case by case can state aims and limits in front of each other. Whether this actually produces better-aligned success criteria is plausible based on the pilot lesson but was not confirmed in the later round.

Hindering context factors

1. **Schools and employers judged on different things.** Vocational schools are assessed largely on how many students obtain a qualification, while employers judge the same trajectory on whether they gained a colleague who can do the work. Both are legitimate aims, but they pull a design in different directions, and in this coalition's first trajectory the difference was never stated out loud and surfaced halfway through.
2. **Partial membership of the coalition.** The education institution was difficult to keep attached and sector bodies only partly involved, which limits how far this brokering function can extend.
3. **Guidance that thins after placement.** Where support from the school side falls away once a candidate is placed, the employer left carrying supervision it had not planned for, which may undermine the willingness this mechanism depends on.

Facilitating context factors

1. **A setting that does not exist otherwise.** Respondents suggest education and employers do not meet systematically without an intermediary, which would make the coalition itself the resource here that facilitates discussion between these two.
2. **A coordinator who translates between the two logics.** Where practice previously varied by organisation, the coalition provides direction, which one respondent described as creating points of connection.
3. **A shared document stating aims explicitly.** Respondents describe a joint document setting out what each side is aiming for, which gives the conversation something to refer back to rather than relying on each party's recollection.

Associated outcomes

1. **A structural connection between education and employers** via a shared platform, described by respondents as among the coalition's most distinctive contributions.
2. **Trajectories that may be easier to run** because education and employer are using the same terms, though this was not verified for the revised round.
3. **For the target group:** respondents anticipate less friction on the work floor because expectations would be aligned before a candidate starts. This is an expectation rather than an observed outcome.

5.Co-creating trajectory content with employers before commissioning curriculum design

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IF a training trajectory for a vulnerable target group must be constructed from scratch and includes a substantial work-based placement component,

THEN the coalition works with employers, iteratively rather than through a single round of input, to crystallise what a candidate needs to learn and be able to do over the course of the trajectory to function as a colleague, and only then commissions education to translate that specification into curriculum content,

LEADING TO employers recognise the resulting curriculum as the product of content they helped work out in detail, rather than a specification handed to education to interpret alone,

AS A RESULT employer engagement with, and reported ownership of, the trajectory increases.

CONVERSELY where employers are consulted once and briefly, or not until after curriculum design, the resulting curriculum does not be calibrated to what employers actually need, and ownership correspondingly lower. This is the sequence the pilot followed.

Before curriculum design begins, the coalition works with employers to crystallise, through iterative discussion rather than a single consultation, what a candidate needs to learn and be able to do to function as a colleague. Only then does it commission education to translate that into curriculum content. One respondent situated this within the coalition's division of labour: the municipality and the public employment service can operationalise a request but cannot originate one, and if the specification is not worked out with employers themselves, responsibility for the trajectory not to settle anywhere. In the pilot the sequence was reversed. Education designed the curriculum first, employers were approached afterwards to supply placement capacity, and no detailed discussion of what a candidate actually needed to learn took place with them at all. On one respondent's account the consequences fell on candidates. That employer's retrospective account is specific: the group included people who had only worked abroad, in very different working cultures, and people who had never worked at all, and they were placed at a level that required both employee skills and command of Dutch that they did not yet have. Her conclusion was that learning employee skills and the language should itself have been step one.

Hindering context factors

1. **National qualification files that bound what can be agreed.** Dutch vocational qualifications are defined in national qualification files, which specify what a course must cover and what a graduate must be able to do. These are set nationally by the body responsible for connecting vocational education to the labour market. Whatever employers and the coalition work out together still has to fit them, which suggests what the conversation can settle may be bounded before it begins.
2. **Thin margins and no spare capacity to engage properly.** Childcare operates on thin margins with most providers having no staff to spare. An employer under that pressure might attend the design meeting, agree with whatever is put forward, and leave without

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having said what their organisation needs and how a program can actually fit their situation. Attendance is therefore not necessarily the same thing as co-creation.

Facilitating context factors

1. **Freedom because no course exists, because the trajectory is built from nothing.** This trajectory did not yet exist and had to be built from scratch, so no vocational school has had a ready-made course to put forward. That absence is what left the content open, with employers deciding what the training should contain rather than commenting on a syllabus that already existed.
2. **The national qualifications body is present and reachable in the region.** The body responsible for vocational qualifications has a regional presence and to know precisely what the national files do and do not permit. Once it is in the room it can tell employers on the spot whether what they are proposing is possible, rather than the coalition discovering months later that an idea cannot be approved.
3. **Few enough employers to know eachother individually.** The childcare sector in this region is small enough for the coalition partners to know each participating employer individually, which is what makes repeated detailed discussion practical. With several hundred employers rather than a dozen, this way of working would presumably be much harder to sustain.

Associated outcomes

1. **A reported increase in employer enthusiasm and ownership,** attributed by the coordinator to the trajectory content having been worked out jointly with employers. This is the coordinator's own account and has not been independently confirmed by employers.
2. **Employer involvement in shaping the plan.** One respondent's view was that organisations only take responsibility for a plan if the request came from them in the first place. Co-creating the actual content is where that becomes real for employers rather than something the coalition merely states, and each time it happens they may have more reason to expect it next time.
3. **For the target group:** the entry level and content are matched to what candidates can actually carry. In the pilot the level was set too high: one employer reports that candidates on the level 3 route could not be kept on because they did not pass the language exam, while the level 2 route worked without that risk.
4. **A plausible route to higher long-term inflow of candidates** on the coalition's own reasoning, though not yet an observed outcome. No cohort had gone through the revised trajectory at the time of interviewing.

6.Binding several employers at once creates flexibility for candidates

> **IF** employers each run trajectories separately without a shared network, so that none of them has anywhere to refer a candidate when a particular match does not work,
>
> **THEN** the coalition creates a shared employer network with collective commitment across several organisations,

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> **LEADING TO** employers reason that a failed match need not be the end, because the candidate could be referred on within the collective, which lowers the risk each of them carries individually,
>
> **AS A RESULT** the group of employers can place candidates in ways that no single employer could manage alone.

Respondents describe this as the intended working of the revised approach with several employers rather than as an outcome already achieved. The logic they set out is that the collective, rather than the individual employer, can ask who has a place when a placement does not work. One respondent explained the reasoning behind moving away from a single employer directly, saying that with one employer the coalition can never do more than hope that employer remains able to take part, since a single employer can always drop out. The employer adviser described the same thing from the employer side as a sparring function, in which employers look at whether someone might fit better elsewhere among them. What this changes is the risk calculation: an employer considering a candidate they are unsure about would not be committing to carrying that situation alone. Whether internal referral actually happens once trajectories are running has not been established and would require data on referrals after a trajectory starts.

Hindering context factors

1. **Membership that carries no conditions.** Where nothing distinguishes an organisation that actively contributes from one that attends, it is unclear whether a referral request would actually be answered by the others.

Facilitating context factors

1. **Several comparable providers facing the same shortage and motivation.** The local sector contains enough providers in a similar position for a collective arrangement to be available as an option rather than a bilateral deal.
2. **A collective agreement that employers have co-signed.** Once the group has agreed and signed off on placing a certain kind of candidate, an individual organisation cannot then say it has no room for one, which is what would make a referral request answerable.
3. **Existing contact between employers outside the meetings.** The informal contact described under regular convening is the channel through which such a referral would in practice run.

Associated outcomes

1. **An anticipated increase in collective placement capacity** beyond what individual employers can achieve. Respondents describe this as the intended working of the new approach rather than a demonstrated outcome.
2. **For the target group:** an anticipated higher chance of a successful landing, since a candidate whose first match does not work would not automatically leave the trajectory. This is the clearest route in the data by which coalition breadth could translate into individual outcomes, but it has not been observed.
3. **A reported lowering of the risk each employer carries,** which may itself be part of why employers willing to take part.

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7.Deciding together what a trajectory is for, and whom it admits

> **IF** coalition partners hold different ideas about what a trajectory should achieve, for example offering people a low-threshold chance to explore a sector while keeping their benefit, as against preparing them for paid work, and these aims have not been separated,
>
> **THEN** the partners decide collectively what the trajectory is for, which entry route fits that aim, and whom it therefore admits, and they tell candidates plainly what the trajectory does and does not lead to,
>
> **LEADING TO** partners being able to explain to each candidate why a route does or does not suit her, and candidates entering with expectations that match what the route can offer,
>
> **AS A RESULT** candidates are more likely to start on a route they can complete and that leads where they expected.
>
> **CONVERSELY** where the door stays open to everyone without a shared decision about the aim, candidates enter routes that do not match their starting position, and those who do not reach the expected result may conclude that their time would have been better spent elsewhere.

A respondent working across regions raised this point on her own initiative, offering it as feedback to the organising partners. In her view, two aims were running through each other within the coalition. One was offering places where people could orient themselves on childcare while keeping their benefit, even if this led nowhere in particular. The other was setting up a route through which people could actually come to work in childcare. She argued that these should be separated, and that the choice between them belonged to the collective rather than to one partner. She named the difficult consequence directly: once the collective settles on a route, only people who can realistically complete it should be admitted. She suggested, as her own assumption, that the wish to keep the door open reflected a conviction that everyone deserves a chance. In her view, this was where the first childcare trajectory had gone wrong. She reported speaking with two participants who were frustrated and felt they could just as well have done something else, and she considered their frustration justified.

Other respondents described the same issue from different positions. A respondent involved in the pilot recalled that the rules may have been too loose, because the introduction was open to everyone and routes were offered at levels 1 to 3. The same respondent stated that partners had repeatedly told candidates that levels 1 and 2 carried no job guarantee. The employer adviser said that expectations had been named often in the pilot and had still diverged. Some candidates assumed they would

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be pedagogical professionals afterwards, whereas the revised route prepares them for admission to a training programme. An employer respondent described expectations among everyone involved as extremely important, because resistance follows when events differ from what people had in mind. The same employer concluded that partners should have agreed together that learning employee skills and the language was sufficient as a first step.

From this we infer that informing candidates is not enough when partners themselves have not settled what the trajectory is for. Clear messages to candidates hold only when they rest on a collective choice about aim and admission. This pattern connects with pattern 4, in which education and employers pursue different definitions of success, and with pattern 5, in which employers help specify trajectory content. It adds a distinct step that comes before both: deciding whom the trajectory is for.

Hindering context factors

1. **Partners judged on different results.** One respondent in an employer interview described municipalities as wanting people in work, education as wanting diplomas and employers as wanting good employees. A diploma without sufficient command of the language may still fall short on the work floor.
2. **A target group with widely varying language skills and work experience.** Where some candidates have worked only abroad and others have never worked, a single entry route is unlikely to fit everyone.

Facilitating context factors

1. **Qualification routes with several entry levels and partial certificates.** Where the education system offers routes at different levels, a coalition can match candidates to a route instead of excluding them altogether.
2. **A collective setting in which choice(s) can be made jointly.** A decision about admission is easier to hold when it has been taken by the group rather than by one partner.

Associated outcomes

1. **A revised route framed as preparation for admission to a training programme,** with a lower entry level (see institutionalisation phase, pattern 1).
2. **For the target group in the pilot:** In the pilot it was not always clear what the trajectory would lead to: a job, a qualification, or a first step toward a training programme. Some candidates expected to become pedagogical professionals afterwards, although partners had told them that levels 1 and 2 carried no job guarantee. A respondent who spoke with two participants reported that they were frustrated and felt they could just as well have done something else. We have no account from the participants themselves.

8. Setting one framework for all candidates before placements begin

> **IF** a coalition places a group of candidates with several organisations or locations at the same time, and each of these applies its own rules, while candidates' financial arrangements also differ,

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> **THEN** the partners agree in advance on one framework that applies to every candidate, covering what candidates may and may not do, how they are paid or supported, and which partner is responsible for what, and they make this framework known from the first week,
>
> **LEADING TO** candidates finding that their situation matches that of the others in their group, and partners being able to refer to the framework when a placement deviates from it,
>
> **AS A RESULT** candidates are less likely to read differences between placements as unequal treatment, and the group can focus on the trajectory itself.
>
> **CONVERSELY** where each placement sets its own terms, candidates who know each other well compare their situations, and differences that may be reasonable on their own become a source of unrest.

The employer adviser from the regional employment centre described the pilot in terms of unequal conditions rather than training content, in two interview rounds. In the first round, she named uniformity across locations as a main lesson of the pilot, adding that candidates told each other that one was allowed something the other was not, which created a lot of noise among participants. She described clarity for everyone as the most important element. In the second round, she explained that candidates had spent seven weeks together at school, four days a week, before their placements began, and had become almost like friends. Once the placements started, they compared what each of them was allowed to do and found many differences. She described this as causing considerable unrest in the group, and said she received many emails about it. She also described the teacher at the time as partly going along with this, so that what different people said diverged and every arrangement seemed contested. Financial arrangements were a second source of unrest: in the pilot, one candidate kept a benefit while another was paid. In the revised approach, one rule applies to everyone. Candidates with a benefit keep it, and candidates without one take part unpaid. She expected a framework document from the first week to remove much of the unrest, with deviations traceable to the party responsible. Asked by the interviewer what had reduced the unrest, she pointed to expectation management and to clear agreements between education, the employer and the employment centre about who is responsible for what. She added that uniformity also requires the teachers who deliver the programme to attend joint sessions, which costs time.

From this we infer that the mechanism works through comparison within the group. A candidate judges her own conditions against those of the people she trained with, not against an abstract standard. For a coalition, this means that harmonising conditions is a collective task. A single member organisation can make its own arrangements consistent, but it cannot align them with those of other organisations. The pattern rests mainly on one respondent, and its effects on candidates have not been observed, because no cohort had completed the revised trajectory at the time of interviewing.

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Hindering context factors

1. **Income support rules that differ with each candidate's situation.** National rules allow some candidates to keep a benefit while others have no entitlement. Unless a coalition sets a common rule, one trajectory therefore carries different financial conditions for people in the same group.
2. **Placements spread across organisations or locations that each set their own practice.** Where decisions about daily arrangements sit with each location, differences arise without anyone intending them, and candidates are usually the first to notice.

Facilitating context factors

1. **A partner that holds the financial arrangements in one place.** The employer adviser described her organisation as carrying the financial side of the trajectory. That makes it possible to set one rule centrally rather than negotiating it with each placement.
2. **A partner willing to act as the driving force with all parties present.** The employer adviser suggested that uniformity follows when one partner takes the lead in bringing everyone together, rather than each employer arranging matters separately.
3. **A first trajectory whose problems partners can name concretely.** Partners could draw on what they had seen go wrong in the pilot when agreeing what the framework should cover.

Associated outcomes

1. **One rule on financial status for all candidates,** reported as in place.
2. **A framework document for the first week,** setting out responsibilities between education, employer and the employment centre, reported as the intended approach.
3. **For the target group:** less unrest and clearer expectations are anticipated. This is not yet an observed outcome.

Institutionalisation phase

1. Evaluating a first attempt openly and translating the diagnosis into a revised design

IF a first trajectory has produced identifiable failures, and an actor is available who has no stake in describing it favourably,

THEN the coalition evaluates it explicitly with those who carried the consequences, including candidates and receiving locations, and translates the diagnosis into concrete design changes,

LEADING TO the coalition treat the failure as working material rather than as a verdict on the approach, and deliberately taking the steps it had previously skipped,

AS A RESULT the next iteration rests on a specific diagnosis rather than on assumption.

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> **CONVERSELY** where failure is read as a verdict on the approach rather than as information about it, the attempt is likely to be discontinued and the diagnosis lost with it.

The first trajectory combined a target group facing several barriers at once with a high qualification target, a single employer, and workplace supervisors who had not been prepared, and success criteria between education and employer were never aligned. Evaluating that experience has produced the most concrete design changes in the programme design. One respondent described steps now being taken that had been skipped the previous time as very positive. Another described attention to workplace supervisors explicitly as a lesson learned, noting that the candidates had formed a close group and that setting out clearly in advance what is and is not permitted could remove the friction that arose when different supervisors allowed different things. A third explained the reasoning behind moving to several employers, saying that with only one employer the coalition can never do more than hope that employer remains able to take part. An employer added the evidence on entry level, reporting that the level 2 group were all able to complete without the contractual risk attached to the higher level. A respondent working nationally described the more general requirement, suggesting that treating failure as productive rather than disqualifying is something a facilitator has to make acceptable within a group, because the reflex on encountering it is to conclude that the approach does not work.

Hindering context factors

1. **A scheduled checkpoint with no agreed criteria behind it.** Setting a decision date is insufficient on its own if the group has not also agreed what a candidate needs to have reached by then. In this coalition that is what produced inconsistent decisions, with some contracts extended for people who months later still had not met the requirement.
2. **Evaluation driven from one partner organisation.** One respondent disagreed with how the pilot evaluation was run, describing it as looked at from the wrong angle, namely how the employer and the public employment service had experienced it, when in her view the coalition does not exist for either of them.
3. **Employer openness that responds to how a placement actually goes.** Openness towards this group does not be fixed. In the first trajectory, as the supervision candidates needed increased, acceptance among colleagues on the work floor fell, which suggests an unmanaged burden can erode the willingness the coalition depends on.

Facilitating context factors

1. **An evaluator with no stake in a favourable account.** Somebody was available to review what happened who gains nothing from a positive description of it. Where every organisation in the room has a stake in how the trajectory is described, the resulting picture unlikely to be honest enough to base the next design on.
2. **A steering group sitting above the operational level.** One employer argued that safeguarding regular review moments belongs with a steering group rather than with operational staff, on the grounds that it can protect them when everyone else is too busy and can settle disagreements the operational partners cannot resolve between themselves.

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3. **A sector already willing to discuss what went wrong.** The open culture described elsewhere in this document is part of what makes candid accounts obtainable rather than defensive ones.

Associated outcomes

1. **Design changes reported as carried through:** several employers instead of one, a lower entry qualification level, workplace supervisors involved before candidates arrive, and agreed decision points.
2. **For the target group: greater consistency across placements.** By aligning expectations and conditions across employers in advance, candidates are less likely to encounter substantial differences between placements, such as one employer allowing activities or arrangements that another does not. This can prevent disagreements and perceptions of unequal treatment between candidates.

2.Writing the theme into a multi-year policy agenda rather than running it as a pilot

> **IF** a coalition's work depends on time-limited project funding, so that partners cannot assume it will still exist once that funding ends,
>
> **THEN** the theme is written into the organisation's own policy and delivery agendas with a stated multi-year horizon and named target groups for later years,
>
> **LEADING TO** the coordinator be held accountable for working to that agenda over several years rather than for delivering results within months, which protects the slow relational work from short-term delivery pressure,
>
> **AS A RESULT** the approach can be extended to further sectors and further target groups rather than ending with the pilot.

One respondent described this shift explicitly. The theme of sectoral development pathways was taken up in both the policy agenda and the delivery agenda of the organisation, with a stated plan to develop provision for particular sectors within a period running to 2027. He described the effect on his own position directly, saying that he is not judged on whether something stands in three months but on whether the organisation is working structurally to that agenda over the coming years, and adding that although he had expected to be further along, he takes considerable energy from how the work is now done. He also described a decision at board level to make development pathways part of the core business of the social development company and said he would have laughed at anyone predicting that earlier, because at the time he did not feel he could get the idea to take hold there at all. The stated intention was structural from the outset: he described always having said that development pathways should be something structural rather than a pilot trajectory, and contrasted working on structural labour market solutions with being able to run a class quickly. what this mechanism changes is not the work itself, but what the coordinator is answerable for, which respondents suggest is what allows the groundwork this document describes elsewhere to be done at all.

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Hindering context factors

1. **Time-limited project funding with no answer about what follows.** Where a coalition runs on project money, who carries the work afterwards remains an open question throughout, and partners reluctant to build the arrangement into their own organisations while they cannot assume it will continue.
2. **Capacity for a dedicated driver depending on local budget discretion.** Whether a region can pay someone to spend substantial time on this depends on what it can free up itself. A respondent working across regions identified this as the clearest difference between regions that progress and regions that stall.
3. **Funding that requires a new coalition to be formed.** Where schemes fund the creation of new coalitions while the collaborations already working receive nothing, which one respondent called the wrong way round, effort goes into constituting structures rather than into the work.

Facilitating context factors

1. **Organisational-level commitment to structural embedding.** Structural continuation requires the theme to be adopted beyond the project itself and incorporated into the organisation's core business. A board-level decision to make development pathways part of the organisation's regular work was described as an important step in moving the approach from a project-based initiative towards structural implementation.
2. **An accountability horizon measured in years rather than months.** Where a coordinator is assessed on working to a multi-year agenda, the early relational work that produces no quick results can be done rather than skipped in favour of demonstrable short-term output.

Associated outcomes

1. **Reported extension to further sectors.** Respondents describe development pathways being established for additional sectors, with a strategic rather than ad hoc approach to which are developed when.
2. **For the target group:** structural embedding is what allows a trajectory to widen beyond its first group. One respondent reports that expansion to further target groups, including refugees with residence status, is already scheduled for later years.
3. **A shift in what the work is measured against,** from whether a class can be run quickly to whether structural labour market solutions are being built. Whether this holds once the current funding ends are not established in these data.

1.6.3 Individual level CMO's

CMO context for supervisors

Work context: maintaining day-to-day continuity dominates attention

Across locations, day-to-day continuity requires constant coordination and problem solving. Several supervisors describe their work as "keeping the puzzle together" when staffing is not stable or when people unexpectedly drop out. In some cases, staff shortages were so severe that a group had to be temporarily closed.

Even when locations are "running well," operational realities still structure how time is used. For example, work pressure can be experienced as strongly dependent on the

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day's group dynamics (e.g., children not sleeping, "difficult" behaviour), and teams explicitly try to reduce evening meetings unless they are truly needed.
This matters for development-oriented leadership because it means that reflective time and structured development conversations must compete with immediate operational priorities. Where instability is high, supervisors explicitly describe that "first the priority is becoming complete again and forming a team so there is calm," with development initiatives being put "on hold" until basic stability returns.

Role of supervisors: hybrid of operations and relational focus
The supervisor role is described as a hybrid function: supervisors carry responsibility for the team and location functioning, while also dealing with practical constraints and continuity. In some cases, the role is explicitly "meewerkend" (working on the group several afternoons) alongside coordination tasks, which reduces slack time and forces constant prioritisation ("what is important now and what can wait").
Support structures around the supervisor role can shift quickly. For example, when a key pedagogical support role leaves, supervisors describe becoming "the only core team member," with additional pedagogical responsibilities added without additional hours.
There is also variation in span of control: some supervisors oversee multiple locations, which structurally reduces day-to-day presence in any single team.

Organisational development backdrop: role (re)definition
The intervention took place against an organisational backdrop where the supervisor role is already being discussed as something that will "change." At least one supervisor explicitly links this to being involved in a workgroup about the future role of supervisors, indicating that role development was a live organisational topic before and during implementation.
This backdrop is important context for later mechanisms around role clarity and ownership: role questions were not only individual uncertainty but embedded in a broader trajectory of redefining what the organisation expects from supervisors.

Cross-location peer infrastructure: "own island" and limited time to talk
A recurring starting condition is that supervisors have limited structured time to speak with other supervisors. Supervisors describe that they "never" speak to each other and that even when there are meetings, these often function as agenda-driven coordination rather than time for meaningful exchange. This contributes to a baseline situation of working on an "island," even though supervisors recognise that others face similar issues.

Team and learning culture: variation in stability, openness, and readiness for development
The interviews show meaningful variation in local team climates that existed before the intervention. Some teams are described as stable and long-tenured, with high self-

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organisation and shared problem solving (e.g., colleagues actively thinking along in scheduling solutions and covering shifts).
Other teams are characterised by internal friction or differing readiness for change. One supervisor describes a “tough” team where long-tenured employees hold on to habits and ways of working, while newer staff are more willing to move but are “pulled back” by the older group.
In addition, when staffing or structure changes disrupt the team, supervisors describe that development work becomes harder to prioritise until basic functioning and team cohesion are restored.
At the same time, supportive relational conditions do exist in some contexts: where “good contact” is present on the location, supervisors can ask colleagues for help when they lack experience, and others will make time when possible (although capacity constraints still apply).

Starting position of supervisors: heterogeneous experience and leadership biography
The starting position of supervisors varies strongly in background and experience. Some are relatively new in the role or organisation, with fluctuating team size and recruitment pressures (including reliance on trainees/interns), and describe having had to close groups due to shortages.
Others entered the role through career transitions and explicitly describe enjoying “the hustle” of planning and coordinating, while lacking prior experience with formal performance and development conversations.
Finally, some supervisors manage multiple locations and work with highly self-directed teams, which shapes both the need for delegation and the risk that agreements “fade” when the supervisor is less present.

1.6.3.1 Core CMO’s at the individual level of supervisors

1) Peer learning strengthens social support and self-efficacy for difficult conversations

Mechanism
The intervention offered structured i*ntervision/peer exchange* with real-case discussion (intervision). This seemed to prompt two related processes. First, *peer exchange* was described as creating *social support* and *normalisation*: supervisors recognised similar challenges in others regarding development-oriented leadership, which may have reduced feelings of “doing it alone.” Second, hearing how peers approached comparable situations and using concrete wording appeared to support *vicarious learning*. Taken together, these processes suggest an increase in *self-efficacy* or confidence to handle difficult conversations.

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Outcomes
Supervisors appeared more likely to approach difficult conversations with *greater confidence* and smoother execution, and to try out peer-derived wording and strategies in practice. Peer exchange also seemed to *help supervisors surface uncertainties* that could be followed up outside the peer setting (e.g., clarification questions to relevant roles in the organisation).

Context: facilitators
This mechanism seemed particularly relevant because normally, supervisors have limited routine time to exchange experiences with other supervisors and experience leadership work as locally isolated. It also appeared to hinge on whether the group climate allowed people to share real cases and uncertainties openly (*psychological safety*).

Hindering context factors
Peer learning may be less effective when group dynamics reduce seriousness or openness (lack of psychological safety), or when participants experience large differences in experience/level that make exchange feel less applicable. It may also add less value for supervisors who already feel highly experienced or well-supported informally.

Overarching CMO

If supervisors have limited peer contact and leadership work is normally experienced as isolated, then peer learning through intervision may strengthen social support and self-efficacy, because shared cases can normalise challenges and provide workable examples and language, which may lead to more confident handling of difficult conversations.

2) Role-mapping reduced role ambiguity and support follow-through on coordination issues

Mechanism
The intervention included a flipchart role-mapping exercise (including HR, supervisor, line management responsibilities). This makes responsibilities more explicit, which supported a *shared understanding* of role boundaries (*role clarity* + *shared mental model* of leadership role). Further, when HR was visible in the discussion, this appeared to provide validation that role questions are *legitimate* and worth acting on, rather than something supervisors should "just figure out."

Outcomes
Role questions became more actionable: supervisors could more readily name what was unclear and where it belonged (*reduced role ambiguity*). There were also indications that, when uncertainty arose about role boundaries and escalation routes—

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for example, whether an issue belonged with the supervisor, HR, or line management—making these uncertainties explicit in the group increased the likelihood that supervisors would take concrete follow-up steps (such as contacting the relevant role-holder for clarification).

Facilitating context factors
This mechanism seemed to particularly be triggered because responsibilities were not always already formalized, as well as when supervisors experience recurring uncertainty about "who owns what" around employee development or escalation routes.

Hindering context factors
For supervisors who either (a) experienced the role-mapping as offering little new value, or (b) relied strongly on entrenched routines in how they handle issues, the exercise was less likely to translate into new behaviour.

Overarching CMO
If responsibilities for employee development and escalation are not fully formalised and supervisors experience the role-mapping exercise as relevant (rather than redundant) and are open to adjusting their usual approach, then role-mapping may reduce role ambiguity and support follow-through, because it can build a shared mental model of role boundaries and legitimise clarification and escalation, which may lead to more actionable coordination and clearer next steps.

3) Conversation techniques and prompt cards increased self-regulation and intentionality in development conversations

Mechanism
The intervention offered co-created prompt cards and concrete conversation techniques (e.g., follow-up questions, silence, slowing down, safer framing). These tools appeared to work as behavioural prompts, helping supervisors to step out of routine responses and prepare more intentionally (**s***elf-regulation; attentional control*). The techniques appeared to provide a simple structure for staying with the conversation and exploring development in greater depth (**c***ognitive structuring; deliberate practice*). Safer framing—grounding feedback in shared standards rather than personal judgement—appeared to reduce concerns about relational harm (*reduced interpersonal threat*), which may have made it easier to address difficult topics (*task-specific self-efficacy*).

Outcomes
Supervisors appeared to conduct key conversations more deliberately: where possible, they planned more protected time and used deeper questioning (more follow-up, more patience). This suggests a shift towards greater intentionality in interaction

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(*behavioural self-regulation*) and more attention to development in official feedback moments.

Facilitating context factors

Whether supervisors could use the prompt cards and techniques seemed to hinge on the degree of operational "breathing space" in their daily work. When the workday allowed even limited preparation time and fewer acute disruptions, supervisors were more able to approach conversations with *intentionality* and sustain *attentional control*. In those conditions, developmental conversations could be planned and deepened, rather than squeezed into short, reactive moments. Uptake also appeared more likely when there was already a routine of formal or semi-formal conversations that could be strengthened, because an existing practice provided a stable behavioural anchor for *deliberate enactment* and *habit formation*.

Hindering context factors

Sustained staffing pressure, frequent interruptions, and day-to-day firefighting appeared to constrain implementation of the cards in real-work scenario's. Under such conditions, supervisors' attention narrowed towards immediate continuity, consistent with *cognitive load* and *attentional narrowing* under stress. This reduced the likelihood that developmental conversations could be prepared, paced, and carried out with depth.

Where development conversations were not structurally embedded—such as lacking protected time or clear expectations—tools risked remaining unused because the surrounding workflow did not support *behavioural consistency*.

Finally, for some highly experienced supervisors, established conversational routines appeared to override the perceived need for new prompts, suggesting that strong prior scripts can limit uptake unless there is a clear reason to revise existing habits (*habit strength*; *automaticity*).

Overarching CMO

If supervisors operate in a context where development conversations risk becoming reactive due to routine pressures, but where at least minimal preparation time and conversational structures are present (**C**), **then** the use of prompt cards and concrete conversation techniques may trigger more intentional pacing and focus in conversations (**M**: activation of self-regulation, attentional control, and reduced interpersonal threat), **because** these tools function as behavioural cues that interrupt automatic responses and provide safe conversational scripts, **leading to** more deliberate and development-focused conversations (e.g., deeper questioning, more patience, protected time), particularly when workload and staffing conditions allow sustained attention (**O**).

4) The pitch exercise appeared to calibrate improvement goals and strengthen ownership (or trigger defensiveness if misaligned)

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Mechanism

The intervention included a pitch assignment in which supervisors formulated and presented a concrete improvement idea to higher-level management and received feedback. This appeared to initiate a process of goal calibration. By presenting their ideas to upper-management, supervisors had to translate initially abstract improvement intentions into concrete proposals and confront these proposals with external feedback. This helped them assess whether their ambitions were sufficiently specific, realistic, feasible, and appropriate to their context, and adjust their plans accordingly. In this sense, the pitch functioned as a calibration mechanism: it helped supervisors align their improvement ambitions with what they perceived as practically achievable, while the act of formulating and presenting a concrete proposal may also have strengthened commitment and perceived ownership (implementation intention; goal commitment).

When feedback was experienced as constructive and aligned with the learning purpose, it appeared to support this calibration process by helping supervisors refine their plans and develop a clearer sense of what was feasible and what next steps were required (goal calibration; perceived behavioural control). However, when feedback was experienced as evaluative or misaligned with expectations, the same exercise could instead trigger defensiveness or feelings of being judged (evaluative threat; reduced psychological safety), interrupting the calibration process.

Outcomes

When the goal calibration pathway was activated, supervisors appeared more likely to refine ambitions into feasible next steps and to continue working on these plans after the session (greater follow-through and ownership). In cases where the feedback triggered threat rather than calibration, supervisors were more likely to experience friction or temporary withdrawal, which could delay uptake or reduce immediate motivation.

Facilitating context factors

This mechanism was more likely to be triggered when there was (1) a learning-oriented climate where improvement was treated as development rather than judgement (*learning orientation*), and/or (2) a baseline of trust and approachability between supervisors and management (*psychological safety*), and/or (3) shared expectations that the pitch was meant to refine feasibility (*expectation alignment*), and (4) enough operational stability to make follow-through feel realistic (*implementation capacity*) existed.

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Hindering context factors

The pitch was held back when, (1) the climate was perceived as evaluative or punitive (*evaluative threat*), (2) expectations about the purpose of the pitch were not aligned (*role/goal ambiguity*), (3) staffing pressure and instability made implementation feel unrealistic (*overload; low capacity*), and (4) line management changed frequently, weakening relationships and continuity, so supervisors were less sure how feedback would be received and what standards applied (*low relational continuity; reduced trust*).

Overarching CMO

If supervisors are required to pitch a concrete improvement idea in a context where feedback is experienced as coaching-oriented and expectations are aligned, **then** the pitch exercise may strengthen ownership and feasibility of action plans, **because** upward feedback helps calibrate goals and clarify next steps, **leading to** more sustained follow-through. However, if the feedback context is experienced as evaluative or misaligned, the same exercise may trigger defensiveness, which can reduce immediate uptake or delay implementation.

1.6.4 Overarching findings of the quantitative and qualitative analyses

1.6.4.1 Reflecting on the quantitative and qualitative results

The quantitative part of the evaluation was designed to capture change among individuals: whether jobseekers obtained qualifications and work, and whether employees and supervisors changed in self-efficacy, career-related outcomes and development practices. What it could not capture was the learning that took place among the partners around these individuals. The qualitative data show that much of what the Living Lab produced lay at that level. Partners came to a shared view of what a trajectory for this group should look like, set up a catch-up route when outcomes fell short of expectations, and developed a different trajectory with a new group of employers that is intended to fit the target group better. That new trajectory has yet to start, so there are no outcome data on it. In this sense, the quantitative results describe the first round of a process whose most important products, at the time of writing, were insights rather than measurable outcomes. The qualitative data make these insights visible, and they also change how the quantitative results themselves can be read.

This is clearest for jobseekers. Questionnaires proved unsuitable for a group with limited proficiency in Dutch and varying literacy levels, and the survey was discontinued after the baseline measurement. The evaluation therefore relied on objective outcomes such as diplomas, partial certificates and subsequent work or training, and changes in self-efficacy or skills could not be measured. The difficulty is itself a finding: the groups that inclusive labour market policy most wants to reach are also the groups for whom standard evaluation instruments work least well. The qualitative data did more than fill this gap. The objective outcomes showed high

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completion alongside comparatively few full diplomas, a pattern that could easily be read as a judgement on the candidates. The coalition data suggest a different reading, in which the diploma figures say more about the fit between the level of the route and the command of Dutch and employee skills candidates brought with them. The qualitative data also show that these outcomes were not final. When the number of full diplomas stayed below what partners had expected, the coalition set up a catch-up trajectory through which several candidates still obtained a diploma or partial certificates. An end-of-programme measurement alone would not have shown this.

For supervisors, the survey showed no significant effects, with very small groups at follow-up and several outcomes developing in the expected direction. The interviews explain why averages only tell part of the story. They show the mechanisms at supervisor level operating under some conditions and not under others, depending for example on operational breathing space, psychological safety and continuity in line management. The interviews also describe marked differences in team climate between locations that existed before the training. In a small sample, the average then combines supervisors for whom the mechanisms were triggered with supervisors for whom they were not. We therefore read the small quantitative effects as uninformative about whether the training can work, rather than as evidence that it does not. The qualitative data shift the question from whether the training worked to where, for whom and under which conditions it could work. On one outcome the two sources point in different directions: supervisors described growing confidence in development conversations, while the self-efficacy scale showed no meaningful change. We cannot resolve this divergence with these data, and we do not treat the qualitative account as the more valid of the two.

For employees, the survey showed little evidence of change in self-efficacy, career self-efficacy, career planning, perceived career possibilities or organisational mobility. The qualitative data suggest why this may be expected at this stage. The training was aimed at supervisors, so any effect on employees depends on supervisors first changing how they conduct development conversations, and on employees then experiencing enough of those conversations to notice a difference. Supervisors described their room for development work as depending on staffing, and some described it as put on hold where a location first had to become fully staffed again. Each step in this chain takes time and is exposed to the same pressure. The qualitative data also indicate that, in conversation with the employer, supporting employees' growth as a route to retention came to matter more than mobility as a goal in itself. Outcomes such as self-efficacy and perceived career possibilities remain relevant to that aim, but organisational mobility becomes a less central yardstick.

These findings should be read in light of an important limitation concerning timing. The coalition interviews took place before the new trajectory started, which is why its effects on candidates could not be examined. The employee interviews in the theory-testing phase, and the quantitative follow-up, took place relatively soon after the supervisor training. Although we collected qualitative data among employees

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themselves, the training may not yet have had enough time to change supervisors' behaviour in ways that employees could notice. Both data sources may therefore have been too close to the intervention to detect effects that could still emerge. This limitation applies to the absence of effects as much as to their presence: the data cannot show that effects will follow, only that the period observed was probably too short to establish whether they do.

1.6.4.2 Impact of the coalition on individual-level initiatives

This section considers what the overarching patterns in the data suggest about how a regional coalition can affect initiatives for individual jobseekers and employees. We focus on structures that recur across the CMO-configurations and on the context in which they arose, because these are most relevant for policymakers and municipal project leaders considering similar approaches elsewhere.

Initiatives for vulnerable groups are assembled across organisations

The Dutch context places the coalition in a specific position. Labour market policy is decentralised: municipalities, the public employment service, education providers and employers each hold their own mandate and budget, and the regional structures that connect them coordinate rather than govern. The elements a vulnerable jobseeker needs to enter work, such as outreach, income support, training, certification, a placement and guidance on the work floor, are therefore held by different organisations. No single organisation can offer a complete trajectory. In our interpretation, this made the coalition less an addition to existing structures than the setting in which an individual-level initiative could be assembled at all.

Looking across the configurations, most of the matters partners had to settle concerned the points where one organisation's responsibility ends, and another's begins. They include who is admitted to a trajectory, the criteria education and employers use to judge success, the conditions that apply when candidates are placed with different organisations, the relation between a candidate's benefit and her placement, and the guidance that continues once a candidate is at work. We infer that individual-level initiatives for vulnerable groups are most vulnerable at these seams, because each organisation can do its own part well while the trajectory as a whole still fails to fit the candidate. The coalition's distinctive contribution is in making these seams visible and agreeing how to handle them. For policymakers, this suggests that the value of a coalition should be judged less by the activities it runs and more by how well it manages the transitions between organisations that a candidate has to pass through. What matters at these transitions is fit: whether what one partner has arranged connects with what the next partner expects, for example whether the level a candidate is trained matches with what a workplace needs. A coalition's contribution may lie less in what each partner does separately than in whether the parts fit together.

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Coalitions learn what an initiative is by doing it

A second structure concerns how partners came to agree on these matters. The configurations suggest that the coalition's impact on individual-level initiatives ran less through a design fixed at the start and more through a gradual process of collective sensemaking. By sensemaking we mean the process through which actors develop a shared interpretation of an ambiguous situation that allows them to act on it (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). At the outset, partners shared a concern about staff shortages and a wish to open the sector to migrant women. What they had not yet established together was what a trajectory for this group should achieve, whom it should admit, which conditions should apply across organisations and what candidates needed to learn first. These questions were settled step by step, in the course of joint work.

The first trajectory was central to this process. In our reading, it functioned as a collective experiment that gave partners concrete experiences to reflect on, including outcomes that differed from what several of them had expected. Beyond adjusting individual activities, partners revisited underlying assumptions, such as who the trajectory was for and in which order partners should contribute to its design. The organisational learning literature describes this as double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), and research on collaborative governance describes shared understanding and the capacity for joint action as developing through repeated cycles of engagement rather than being in place at the start (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012).

Two implications follow for individual-level initiatives. First, each round of joint reflection aimed to bring the initiative closer to what the people involved wanted and needed, and only the coalition could align the parts held by different organisations with each other. Second, an initiative whose purpose and design partners have worked out together is carried by several organisations rather than by one, which may make it more durable. Respondents described development pathways being extended to further sectors and target groups, which suggests that what partners learned is being carried beyond the original initiative. For municipal project leaders, the practical lesson is that a first trajectory is better planned as a learning round than as a finished product, with the time, openness and evaluation this requires. The effects of the redesigned trajectory on candidates had not yet been observed at the time of interviewing, so this conclusion concerns the process rather than its results.

Labour shortages open the door but limit what happens inside

A third structure runs through the economic context. The regional labour market is among the tightest in the Netherlands, and childcare operates on thin margins. The shortage gave employers a reason to consider a group they might otherwise have overlooked, and in this sense it was the condition that made the initiative possible. The same conditions left little time and money for what this group needed once inside: preparation, guidance and room to learn. In our interpretation, this shaped which

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initiatives could take hold. They had to ask little extra of employers, which is why the coalition took on coordinating work that employers could not carry. The cost of guidance on the work floor, however, remained with employers, and respondents described it as a financial barrier. National policy was described as oriented mainly towards preparing candidates, with little structural support for the organisations that receive them. We infer that in shortage sectors the binding constraint on individual-level initiatives is less employers' willingness than their capacity, and that this is where public support may make the most difference.

Progress depends on a few people in an unstable environment

A fourth structure concerns instability. During the project, national instruments were being revised, the public employment service was reorganising, partner organisations were going through their own transitions and contact persons changed. Each of these interrupted the shared understanding partners were building. The configurations show a small number of people holding the process together, and a period of stagnation after one of them left. We infer that the coalition's impact on individual-level initiatives rests to a considerable degree on the continuity of these people. This dependence is a strength while they remain, because trust and shared understanding accumulate in them, and a risk once they leave. For policymakers, it suggests that continuity of coordinating staff is not an administrative detail but a condition for impact.

Coalitions mobilise around shared problems

Finally, the coalition's impact was concentrated on the inflow side. The supervisor training for current employees was developed and delivered within one organisation, by the employer and the research partner, and the coalition-level configurations say little about it. We infer that a regional coalition is most readily mobilised around a problem that no employer can solve alone, such as finding new staff, while the development of current staff is more easily treated as each organisation's own business. This asymmetry has consequences for approaches such as ENGINE, which rely on connecting the two, as discussed in section 1.6.3.3.

1.6.4.3 The ENGINE approach

The SYNCLUSIVE proposal describes the ENGINE as a systems approach that creates traction in the regional labour market. Its core mechanism is that upward or sideward mobility of current, often low-skilled employees frees up starting positions, which prepared jobseekers can then fill. To make this work, the proposal combines three elements. The first is a regional coalition of all relevant stakeholders, built along the lines of Community Coalition Action Theory, with the municipality or regional labour market centre in a coordinating role. The second is an integrated intervention package attuned across levels, including development of employees, development-oriented leadership for supervisors, innovation of education and recognition of skills, matching, and preparation of jobseekers, with peer learning as a central format. The third is a stepwise and adaptive process in which partners identify stakeholders, drivers and

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barriers, integrate and adapt existing interventions, implement them with action-based monitoring and evaluate the results. Below, we reflect on which of these elements the Amersfoort data support and which they call into question.

Coalition building

The data support the proposal's premise that regional collaboration is a precondition. As argued in section 1.6.3.2, the jobseeker trajectory could only be assembled across organisations. Two aspects of the proposal's picture fit the data less well. First, the proposal envisages a broad coalition of all relevant stakeholders, including trade unions, civil society organisations and work integration social enterprises. In the coalition-level configurations, the coalition centres on the municipality, the employment centre, education and childcare employers, and other stakeholders are hardly visible. In our interpretation, a smaller coalition may have made progress easier in a sector without a representative employers' body. This may suggest that a coalition does not need to involve every relevant stakeholder from the outset: starting small, with the partners a trajectory most directly depends on, can be enough to begin learning, with broader participation added once there is something concrete to join.

Second, in the SYNCLUSIVE's proposal, it treats the coalition mainly as the vehicle through which interventions are delivered, which implies that the coalition is formed first and then acts. In Amersfoort, coalition and intervention developed in parallel. The configurations suggest that this was partly a matter of sensemaking at a level above the trajectory itself. The coalition was built around national instruments, a subsidy scheme and sectoral development pathways, whose conditions were still being revised and about which information reached the region slowly and unpredictably. As long as these instruments had no concrete form, respondents described partners as unable to weigh what participation would yield, and willingness remained at the level of intention. In our interpretation, the coalition was also the setting in which partners tried to work out together what these instruments meant for them in practice, and in which a partner could take on the resulting paperwork, such as subsidy applications, on behalf of employers. Partners thus learned what the coalition was for while learning how the national framework around it worked. For the ENGINE approach, this suggests that coalition building should be planned as a process that runs throughout implementation, rather than as a first step to be completed before interventions begin.

Multi-level intervention package

The package in Amersfoort was intended to address inflow and development together, through a pathway for jobseekers and a training for supervisors. Several of the proposal's elements were realised. Jobseekers were prepared through a tailored trajectory, supervisors received development-oriented leadership training, and the use of partial certificates reflects the proposal's emphasis on recognising skills in steps. Peer learning appeared to work well at supervisor level, where exchange with peers helped supervisors normalise difficulties and find usable approaches.

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The central mechanism of the ENGINE, however, did not appear to drive employers' interest. The interviews suggest that employers were interested above all in inflow. A municipal respondent observed that the childcare pilot had started by bringing people in at the entry level, rather than by first creating room there through the development of current staff. An employer, asked what mattered most, said that at this moment it was simply having enough people. In our interpretation, this reflects a mismatch between the ENGINE logic and the labour market in which the Living Lab operated. The ENGINE logic assumes that starting positions are occupied and must be freed up before new people can enter. In a sector with structural shortages, extra hands are needed at every level, and particularly at the entry level. Room for newcomers does not first have to be created, so a chain of vacancies set in motion by employee mobility has little to act on.

Retention, by contrast, appears to offer a more promising point of connection. Although retention tends to receive comparatively little attention in a sector where shortages keep the focus on recruitment (section 1.2), it concerns a problem employers already experience, and the employee-side initiative was framed around it from the outset. In conversation with the employer during implementation, it became clear that mobility did not need to be a goal in itself, and that supporting employees in their growth might contribute more to retention. This suggests that the ENGINE's core mechanism depends strongly on labour market conditions. In shortage sectors, a version that frames employee development as a retention strategy, and treats inflow and retention as two sides of the same staffing problem, may connect better with what employers already want. The outcomes reported in this chapter also remain well below the estimates in the proposal, which anticipated between 75 and 150 jobseekers entering work per Living Lab during the project. In our interpretation, this reflects the time needed to build a coalition and to learn from a first trajectory, rather than evidence against the principle of collaboration itself.

Co-design and co-implementation

The adaptive process described in the SYNCLUSIVE proposal is the element the Amersfoort data support most clearly. Co-design was less a principle applied from the start than a practice that developed through successive iterations. Looking across the configurations, the iterations differed in what they were about. The first round concerned the content and level of a trajectory. The evaluation of that round raised questions about partners' own roles, such as the order in which employers and education contribute and the conditions that apply across organisations. Later design choices concerned the structure around the trajectory, such as a network of several employers and a shared framework for candidates. In our interpretation, each iteration moved the learning one level up, from what candidates should learn, to how partners should work together, to what the coalition as a whole should arrange. This resembles what the evaluation literature describes as developmental evaluation, in which evaluation supports ongoing adaptation in complex settings (Patton, 2011).

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This iterative character also clarifies what co-design looks like in practice. Partners rarely designed something from nothing. The trajectory built on existing vocational routes, which the coalition shortened and arranged so that they could lead to partial certificates or a full diploma. Existing meetings and existing relationships with employers became the setting for joint work. In our interpretation, co-design at regional level consists largely of adapting what already exists to a target group and a set of partners, and it is in this adaptation that partners come to see an initiative as partly their own. The coordinator attributed greater employer ownership to employers having worked out trajectory content in detail, although employers themselves did not confirm this. Ownership may therefore follow less from being consulted and more from having changed something.

Two critical observations qualify this picture. First, co-design in the coalition took place mainly among organisations. In the coalition data, the target group's perspective entered chiefly through the evaluation of the first trajectory and through what partners reported hearing from candidates, rather than through direct participation in design. Co-design at regional level may therefore be well placed to align organisations with each other while remaining at some distance from the people the trajectory is for. Second, iteration depends on capacity that the economic context erodes. Employers under pressure may attend design meetings without being able to contribute fully, so participation does not guarantee co-creation, and a coalition may be unable to run as many learning rounds as it would need. For the ENGINE approach, this suggests that the adaptive process should be resourced as a core activity, with time for successive rounds and a deliberate choice about whose experiences inform each of them.

1.6.4.4 Maintenance and sustainability of the coalition

Looking across the maintenance and institutionalisation configurations, several general lessons emerge about how a coalition of this kind can continue to exist. They concern the process of collaboration more than its content.

The first lesson is that the process of working together deserves as much attention as the work itself. Most of the maintenance configurations are not about trajectories but about how partners relate: bringing competitors together in a setting they experience as safe, making explicit what each partner brings, wants and is responsible for, showing examples from comparable organisations, and creating a setting in which education and employers can question each other. A respondent working nationally described a declaration of intent in similar terms. In that account, the value of the declaration lay less in the document than in the conversation it prompted about what each side expects, contributes and does when something goes wrong. In our interpretation, a recurring conversation about the collaboration itself, a meta-conversation alongside the substantive work, may be one of the most important conditions for a coalition to last. It allows partners to notice and address differences in expectation before they erode commitment.

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The second lesson concerns the kind of partners and the kind of accountability a coalition needs. The configurations suggest that the coalition's learning depended on treating disappointing outcomes as working material rather than as a verdict, and on partners being willing to try again. The institutionalisation configurations show the same logic at organisational level: once the theme was written into a multi-year agenda, the coordinator was held accountable for working towards it over several years rather than for results within months, which protected the slow relational work. We infer that coalitions of this kind are more likely to last when their partners, and the organisations behind them, are not driven mainly by short-term targets, and are prepared to experiment and learn together without a fixed outcome that has to be reached within a project period. This sits uneasily with the formation-phase finding that partners need something concrete to weigh before they commit. In our interpretation, the two can be reconciled by making progress visible through concrete steps, decisions and products, while leaving the eventual outcomes open.

The third lesson is that sustainability requires trust to move from individuals to organisations. The coalition started through personal relationships, stalled when a central person left, and regained momentum once roles and mandates were recorded. Later steps, such as a board-level decision and a multi-year agenda, anchor the theme in organisations rather than in people. This transition does not replace personal trust, which remains what makes open conversation possible, but it makes the coalition less vulnerable to the departure of any single person.

The fourth lesson is that continued participation has to remain worth it for partners in the currency they are short of. For employers in this sector, that currency is time rather than goodwill. The configurations show the coalition taking over coordinating work, asking what it can offer employers rather than only what they can contribute, and binding several employers together so that each carries less risk. We infer that a coalition sustains itself partly by continuing to lower the cost of taking part, and by keeping the relationship reciprocal.

These lessons come with caveats. Several of the developments that point towards continuation, such as the declaration of intent and the extension to further sectors, were intentions rather than completed steps at the last interview round, and they were reported largely by partners closely involved in the coalition. The coalition's coordinating capacity also depends on time-limited funding, while funding schemes that support new coalitions offer little to collaborations that already work, as one respondent described. In our interpretation, a coalition of this kind is better understood as regional infrastructure that requires continuing investment than as a project that should become self-sustaining. What most needs to be sustained is not a particular activity but the coalition's capacity to keep learning together.

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SYNCLUSIVE

Funded by
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Living Lab Report

Portugal

Appendix 4 to D2.1 Realist Evaluation



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1. Living Lab: Portugal

The Portuguese Living Lab brings together four complementary settings: Lisbon, Évora (Alentejo), Lagoa (Algarve), and a digital living lab with nationwide reach. Together, these settings provide a framework for bringing different stakeholders together to address challenges related to labour-market inclusion, employability, skills development, and career progression. The Living Lab brings together jobseekers, employees, employers, public and private organisations, and other relevant stakeholders, with the aim of developing and testing interventions that respond to the needs identified within the different local and sectoral contexts.

This section presents the development and implementation of the Portuguese Living Lab and discusses the main findings emerging from its activities and evaluation. It begins by describing the coalition-building process, including the main stakeholders involved, the different Living Lab settings, and the contexts in which the activities were developed. It then introduces the target groups, focusing primarily on jobseekers and employees, and describes their main characteristics and participation in the Living Lab.

The next part of the section presents the implementation of the intervention package. It describes the main areas addressed by the interventions, including employability skills, management skills, and digital skills and productivity tools, as well as the drivers and barriers identified through the Living Lab process. This provides the basis for understanding how the interventions were designed and implemented in response to the needs of the target groups and the wider labour market context.

The section then presents the quantitative findings, examining changes observed between the different stages of data collection and considering the extent to which the available evidence addresses the research questions. These findings provide an initial assessment of the changes observed among participants, while also highlighting the limitations associated with the available data and the timing of the evaluation.

This is followed by the realist evaluation, which complements the quantitative analysis by examining how, why, and under what circumstances the Living Lab contributed to the observed outcomes. The analysis considers Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) configurations at both the coalition and individual levels, with particular attention to the processes through which coalition building, co-design, co-implementation, and the intervention packages may contribute to labour-market opportunities and progression.

Finally, the section brings together the quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide an integrated interpretation of the Portuguese Living Lab experience. Combining the different strands of analysis, it identifies the main findings, enabling factors, and challenges emerging from the implementation and draws together the key lessons from the Portuguese case.

Target groups

The Portuguese Living Lab targets jobseekers and employees across different age and employment profiles.

The current jobseeker dataset contains 222 participants, including 174 classified as young jobseekers (16-34 years) and 46 as other unemployed jobseekers (>34 years). The employee group contains 73 participants, including 26 young employees (18-34 years) and 44 senior employees (>34 years).

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Among jobseekers, women represent 68.5% (152/222) of the sample and men 31.1%, with one participant identifying as other. Among employees, women represent 63.0% (46/73) and men 37.0%.

Education levels also differ between the two populations. Among jobseekers with available baseline information, 22.4% have none/basic education, 43.8% intermediate education and 33.8% higher education. Among employees, approximately 1.4% have none/basic education, 27.5% intermediate education and 71.0% higher education.

Implementation of the intervention package

The intervention package implemented through the Portuguese Living Labs was designed to strengthen participants' skills, employability, and career development in response to identified labour-market needs. The interventions were organised into three main areas: employability skills, management skills, and digital skills and productivity tools. Together, these intervention areas address complementary dimensions of labour market participation and progression, including the development of skills relevant to employment, professional and managerial capabilities, and the ability to use digital technologies and productivity tools in changing workplace contexts.

The intervention package was implemented among both jobseekers and employees across the Portuguese Living Lab settings. The jobseeker group comprised 222 participants, while 73 employees participated in the intervention activities. Among jobseekers, 93 participants took part in Employability Skills interventions, 66 in Management Skills interventions, and 63 in Digital Skills and Productivity Tools interventions. In addition, 39 jobseekers were included in a no-intervention control group. This control group is used only for baseline characterization and is therefore not included in the longitudinal analysis of intervention effects. Among employees, 21 participants participated in employability skills interventions, 18 in Management Skills interventions and 34 in Digital Skills and Productivity Tools interventions.

Implementation took place across the different Portuguese Living Lab settings, namely Lisbon, Évora, Lagoa, and the Digital Living Lab. Participation varied across locations and target groups. Among jobseekers, Lisbon and Évora accounted for the largest shares of participants, while among employees, Lagoa and Évora represented the largest participant groups. The Digital Living Lab currently includes only a small number of participants. Nevertheless, its digital platform played an important complementary role by providing pedagogical content and supporting the delivery of digital and hybrid courses implemented through the physical Living Labs. Thus, the digital component supported the integration of digital delivery methods across the different intervention settings, rather than functioning solely as a separate intervention setting.

The longitudinal data provide preliminary evidence of positive changes among jobseekers following participation in the intervention package. In the matched T0–T1 sample, considering only participants with completed observations at both time points, mean work ability increased from 6.79 at baseline (T0) to 7.44 at T1, corresponding to a mean increase of 0.64 points. This change was statistically significant ($p = 0.002$) and was associated with a large within-subject effect size (Cohen's $dz = 1.88$). Positive changes were also observed across several other outcomes, including skills, motivation, self-efficacy, job-seeking activity, job-search attitude, job-search self-efficacy, and mental health problems. However, these changes did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

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The observed pattern therefore suggests that the intervention package may have been particularly relevant to participants perceived capacity to work, as reflected in the significant improvement in work ability. There was also some indication of potential changes in skills and motivational resources, although the corresponding statistical evidence was weaker (Skills: p = 0.066, Cohen's *dz* = 0.095; Motivation: p = 0.054, Cohen's *dz* = 0.121). These findings should be interpreted as preliminary rather than as evidence of a causal intervention effect, particularly given the available sample and longitudinal design. They nevertheless provide an initial indication of areas in which the intervention package may have supported positive change among participating jobseekers and provide a basis for the subsequent analysis of the Portuguese Living Lab results.

For employees, the available evidence is more limited. The matched T0–T1 samples (only for completed pairs) are substantially smaller (between 11 and 19 individuals), and none of the analysed outcomes showed a statistically significant change. Work Ability increased modestly from 7.53 to 7.68, while very small variations were observed in self-efficacy, job-progression self-efficacy, job satisfaction, organisational mobility, career planning and mental health problems. These results should be interpreted cautiously because of the limited number of matched observations.

The Portuguese Living Lab intervention packages have been implemented across several complementary skill areas and has reached both jobseekers and employees. The evidence shows positive changes among jobseekers, particularly in Work Ability, but do not yet provide sufficient evidence to establish causal intervention effects or longer-term employment and organisational mobility outcomes. In particular, the very limited availability of T2 data means that changes in employment status, job transitions, new responsibilities, or organisational mobility cannot currently be assessed reliably.

1.1 Building a Coalition

The Portuguese Living Labs were developed through a process of coalition building that preceded and supported the implementation of the intervention activities. The process brought together organisations with complementary knowledge, resources and institutional positions in employment, education and training, local development, innovation and digital transformation. Rather than being a pre-existing structure, the coalition developed progressively around a shared concern with labour-market inclusion, skills development and the changing requirements of employment. This process provided the organisational basis for establishing the Living Labs and for adapting and implementing the SYNCLUSIVE approach across different territorial contexts.

ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa played a central coordinating role in this process. The available evidence describes ISCTE as the lead coordinating partner and indicates that it provided structured leadership throughout the development and maintenance of the coalition. At the same time, coalition building involved the mobilisation of regional and sectoral actors, including IEFP, municipalities, educational and training organisations, employers and business-related actors, innovation organisations and community-based stakeholders. The composition of the coalition therefore varied according to the characteristics and priorities of each territorial context.

The coalition subsequently developed into three physical Living Lab settings, in Lisbon, Évora and Lagoa, and a national Digital Living Lab/sub-network. These settings were not identical in their institutional composition or labour-market context. Instead, each brought together a

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combination of actors relevant to the local or sectoral environment. The Lisbon coalition was situated within an urban and technology-oriented environment and included ISCTE, IEFP, Rede Emprega–CML, Casa do Artista, TermoCerto, Audax and Swatter. The Évora coalition involved ISCTE, PACT, IEFP, the Municipality of Évora, an Association of Entrepreneurs and a recruitment and selection consultancy, reflecting the specific characteristics of the regional labour market and its connections to sectors such as agriculture, wine, olive oil, aeronautics and commerce. The Lagoa coalition brought together ISCTE, the Municipality of Lagoa, Turismo de Portugal, a hotel manager, Timming and IEFP, with activities linked particularly to tourism, smart-city development, cybersecurity and digital innovation. The Digital Living Lab operated at national level and connected ISCTE and IEFP with networks and organisations working in areas including IT, sustainability, tourism, training and education, and entrepreneurship.

The roles of coalition members were complementary rather than interchangeable. ISCTE provided overall coordination and leadership, supported communication and collaboration between partners, and maintained alignment with the wider SYNCLUSIVE objectives. IEFP and employment-related actors contributed expertise in employment support, employability and labour-market integration and provided important links to jobseekers and employment services. Municipalities and other local actors contributed to territorial mobilisation, local networking and the connection of the Living Labs with local priorities and institutional ecosystems. Training and skills-development organisations contributed to the development and delivery of training activities, while innovation, business and digital actors brought sector-specific knowledge and connections to changing labour-market and technological requirements. Participants and end-users also contributed through their experiences, needs and feedback, providing an important source of information for adapting activities to the characteristics of the target groups.

The development of the coalition can be understood as a progressive process with different stages of coalition formation, maintenance, and longer-term institutionalisation. During the initial formation stage, the focus was on bringing previously distinct academic, public-sector, municipal and private-sector actors into a shared operating space. The evidence suggests that the recognition of common challenges and the perceived benefits of collaboration helped create an initial basis for cooperation. Existing relationships between ISCTE, municipal actors and regional organisations also facilitated the establishment of the regional coalitions, while the early involvement of key municipal stakeholders supported the formation process. At the same time, limited representation of employer organisations constituted an important constraint, particularly given the role of employers in creating employment and progression opportunities.

During the maintenance phase, ISCTE continued to provide structured coordination, while coalition members were increasingly involved in sector-specific activities and in shaping elements of the intervention content. Regular communication, progress updates and opportunities for members to contribute to the development of activities supported continued engagement. The evidence indicates that stakeholder involvement was particularly strong where participation generated clear and practical benefits for the organisations involved. The coalition also expanded its activities, including the delivery of digital skills training and the development of additional partnerships, such as with secondary schools. However, leadership or coordinator changes within partner organisations and difficulties in engaging SMEs constrained the continuity and breadth of participation.

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The third-dimension concerns longer-term sustainability and institutionalisation. The evidence indicates an ambition to move from a project-based coalition towards more embedded forms of collaboration within existing regional structures. In this context, regional organisations and institutions such as PACT in Évora, municipal networks in Lagoa and IEFP are identified as potential structures through which elements of the Living Lab approach could be sustained. However, the available evidence does not yet demonstrate that leadership has formally transferred from ISCTE to these organisations. Rather, the evidence points to a possible transition towards broader institutional ownership and integration of coalition practices within existing regional ecosystems. This distinction is important when assessing the extent to which the coalition has progressed from project-based collaboration towards institutionalisation.
In summary the Portuguese coalition developed from an initially ISCTE-coordinated mobilisation of stakeholders into a multi-actor structure operating across three territorial Living Labs and a national digital network. Its development was characterised by increasing stakeholder participation, adaptation to different regional contexts and the creation of sector-specific partnerships. At the same time, the process was not uniform across settings: the composition, degree of engagement and local opportunities for collaboration differed between Lisbon, Évora, Lagoa and the Digital Living Lab. These differences are important for understanding how the Living Lab approach operated in practice and provide the basis for the subsequent realist analysis of the contextual conditions, mechanisms and outcomes associated with coalition building.

1.2 The target group

The Portuguese Living Labs addressed labour-market inclusion through two complementary pathways: labour-market entry for vulnerable jobseekers and increased mobility and progression for vulnerable employees. This dual focus reflects the SYNCLUSIVE objective of strengthening the participation and retention of vulnerable people in the labour market, both by facilitating access to employment and by supporting workers already in employment to adapt to changing skills requirements and pursue upward or sideward mobility. In this context, talent development and the development of transferable skills can contribute not only to employability but also to sustained participation and progression within organisations and across the labour market.
The quantitative dataset comprises 222 jobseekers and 73 employees, for a total of 295 participants across the Portuguese Living Labs. These figures therefore capture two interconnected dimensions of the project's inclusion approach: entry into the labour market and mobility within employment, rather than representing two separate and unrelated target populations.

Jobseekers

The jobseekers group comprises 222 participants. The majority were young people: 174 participants were classified as young people aged 16–34, while 44 were classified as other unemployed jobseekers. A further 39 participants belonged to the young-person control group. Two participants were classified as employees over 34 and two cases had missing target-group information.
The jobseeker sample was predominantly female, with 152 women (68.5%) and 69 men (31.1%), while three participants selected another response or preferred not to answer.

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Regarding education, among the 219 participants with valid information, 22.4% had none/basic education, 43.8% had intermediate education and 33.8% had higher education. This indicates a heterogeneous target group in terms of educational background, with intermediate education being the most common level.
The jobseekers participated in different intervention areas:

- Employability Skills: 93 participants
- Management Skills: 66 participants
- Digital Skills and Productivity Tools: 63 participants
- No intervention – Control group: 39 participants

The jobseeker target group was therefore particularly relevant for interventions aimed at strengthening employability, skills, motivation, job-search capabilities and confidence in navigating the labour market.

Employees

The employee dataset comprises 73 participants. Of these, 44 (60.3%) were classified as employees over 34 years and 26 (35.6%) as young people aged 16–34, with three cases missing target-group information.
The employee sample was also predominantly female, comprising 46 women (63.0%) and 27 men (37.0%). Educational attainment was generally higher than among the jobseeker group: among the 69 participants with valid information, 71.0% had higher education, 27.5% had intermediate education and 1.4% had none/basic education.
The employee interventions were distributed across the three main intervention areas:

- Digital Skills and Productivity Tools: 34 participants
- Employability Skills: 22 participants
- Management Skills: 17 participants

The employee target group was therefore primarily relevant to interventions supporting continuous skills development, career planning, self-efficacy, organisational mobility and adaptation to changing workplace requirements.

Territorial dimension

The target groups were distributed across the Portuguese Living Lab contexts. Among jobseekers, the largest groups were located in LL Lisbon (107 participants) and LL Évora (110 participants), while smaller groups were represented in LL Digital (3) and LL Lagoa (2). Among employees, LL Lagoa included 36 participants, LL Évora 23, LL Lisbon 13 and LL Digital 1.
This distribution provides a differentiated territorial perspective, particularly through the contrast between the predominantly urban Lisbon context and the predominantly rural Évora context, while Lagoa and the Digital Living Lab provide additional implementation settings.
The target group design reflects a two-sided labour-market perspective: supporting unemployed people in developing the capabilities required to enter or re-enter employment, while simultaneously supporting employees in maintaining and developing their skills and career opportunities. The current dataset provides a strong basis for describing the characteristics of these groups and their participation in the intervention areas, although it

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does not contain sufficient information to establish detailed recruitment, attendance, completion or dropout rates.

1.3 From drivers & barriers to solutions

The Portuguese Living Lab has responded to identified labour-market barriers through a combination of skills development, employability interventions and management-oriented activities.
The intervention portfolio represented in the current datasets comprises three principal intervention types:

- Employability Skills
- Management Skills
- Digital Skills and Productivity Tools

For jobseekers, the dataset also includes a no-intervention/control group (39 participants), which provides an important basis for future comparative analysis.
The current evidence suggests that the intervention package has been particularly relevant to participants' perceived capacity to work. Among jobseekers with paired T0–T1 observations, Work Ability increased from 6.73 (SD 2.61) to 7.42 (SD 2.12), corresponding to a mean increase of 0.64 points, and a very large effect size (p=0.002; Cohen's d z=1.88). Skills, Motivation, Self-efficacy, Job-seeking activity, Job-search attitude, Job-search self-efficacy and Mental health problems also showed positive changes, although these did not reach conventional statistical significance.
The results therefore provide preliminary evidence that the Living Lab interventions may contribute to improvements in perceived work readiness and related psychosocial resources. However, given the observational nature of the current analysis, small, matched samples and substantial missingness at follow-up, these findings should be regarded as exploratory rather than causal evidence of intervention effectiveness.

1.4 Quantitative results

The available quantitative data allow a partial and exploratory assessment of the first two research questions, particularly regarding changes in individual-level outcomes between T0 (baseline) and T1 (post-intervention). However, the available data do not support strong causal conclusions about the effects of the intervention package, and the results should therefore be interpreted as preliminary evidence of change rather than as demonstrated intervention effects.

Research Question 1 – Jobseekers:

To what extent do jobseekers experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as Living Lab-specific outcomes, following participation in the intervention or intervention package?

For jobseekers, the results provide preliminary evidence of positive change in some outcomes between T0 and T1. The clearest finding concerns Work Ability, which increased from a mean

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of 6.79 at T0 to 7.44 at T1 among 87 matched observations (mean change = +0.64; p = 0.002; Cohen's dz = 1.88). This represents the strongest statistically supported T0–T1 change, and highest effect size identified in the jobseeker dataset.

Smaller positive changes were also observed, with small effect sizes in Skills (Δ = +0.018; p = 0.066; Cohen's dz = 0.095), Motivation (Δ = +0.026; p = 0.054; Cohen's dz = 0.121), and Job-search self-efficacy (Δ = +0.027; p = 0.118; Cohen's dz = 0.139). These changes did not reach the conventional $p < 0.05$ threshold and should therefore be considered indicative rather than statistically confirmed. Self-efficacy and job-search attitude also showed small positive changes (Δ = +0.004; p = 0.715; Cohen's dz = 0.099 and Δ = +0.010; p = 0.313; Cohen's dz = 0.073, respectively), but these were not statistically significant. The mental health problems and the job seeking activity stayed stable between T0 and T1 moment (Δ = -0.021; p = 0.152; Cohen's dz = 0.121 and Δ = 0.000; p = 1.000; Cohen's dz = 1.703).

Overall, the jobseeker results suggest some improvement in selected individual-level outcomes, particularly Work Ability, while evidence for changes in the other IMBP-related constructs remains more limited.

Research Question 2 – Employees:

To what extent do employees experience changes in self-efficacy, skills, and other IMBP-related constructs, as well as Living Lab-specific outcomes, following participation in the intervention or intervention package?

For employees, the quantitative evidence is inconclusive. The matched T0–T1 samples are substantially smaller than those available for jobseekers, generally ranging from 11 to 19 observations depending on the outcome. None of the analysed employee outcomes showed a statistically significant T0–T1 change at the conventional $p < 0.05$ level.

For example, employee Self-efficacy decreased slightly (Δ = −0.053; p = 0.152; Cohen's dz = 0.155), while Job-progression self-efficacy (Δ = −0.072; p = 0.446; Cohen's dz = 0.313), Organisational mobility (Δ = −0.580; p = 0.187; Cohen's dz = 0.140), and Career planning (Δ = −0.039; p = 0.428; Cohen's dz = 0.212) also showed non-significant changes and small effect size. Work Ability increased slightly and revealed a moderate effect size (Δ = +0.158; p = 0.331; Cohen's dz = 0.688), while Job satisfaction remained essentially unchanged (Δ = +0.001; p = 0.989; Cohen's dz = 0.229).

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that the interventions had no relevant effect. Rather, the small dimension of the paired samples and the resulting limited effect size dimension mean that the available employee data are insufficient to draw robust conclusions about changes associated with the intervention package.

Research Question 3 – Mobility effects:

To what extent does the intervention package lead to changes in jobseekers' employment status and in employee mobility within organisations, such as employment transitions or shifts in tasks and responsibilities?

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This research question cannot currently be answered reliably using the available Portuguese quantitative dataset. Although the datasets contain T2 variables intended to capture longer-term outcomes, T2 observations are extremely sparse in both the jobseeker and employee datasets. Consequently, there are insufficient valid observations to conduct a robust longitudinal assessment of employment transitions among jobseekers or organisational mobility among employees.

Therefore, no reliable conclusion can currently be drawn regarding the longer-term mobility effects of the intervention package. This limitation should be explicitly acknowledged for the Portuguese Living Labs rather than presenting the absence of evidence as evidence of no effect.

The quantitative evaluation provides preliminary evidence of improvement among jobseekers, particularly in Work Ability, while the evidence for employees remains inconclusive and the longer-term mobility question cannot currently be assessed because of insufficient T2 data. Further data collection at T2, with adequate participant follow-up and matched observations, would be required to assess employment transitions and organisational mobility more robustly.

1.4.1 Responses in Portugal

Table 1 show the number of contacted individuals, the number of participants enrolled in the interventions and the number of jobseekers and employees that accepted to take part in this research and completed the proposed questionnaires. Of a total of 404 jobseekers contacted, 387 began a training course or intervention. The drop-out rate was 23.3 per cent, meaning that 297 jobseekers were empowered to enter or re-enter the labour market.

Table 1: Participation in the interventions and quantitative research in the Portuguese Living Labs.

	Number of people that were recruited for the training/ intervention	Number of people that started the training/ intervention	Number of people that dropped out of the training/ intervention	Number of people that completed the training/ intervention	Number of people participate in research
Jobseekers	404	387	90	297	222
Employees	181	181	0	181	73

The main characteristics of jobseekers and employees that fulfil the questionnaires are presented in Table 2.

Regarding the **jobseekers**, the average age is 28.6 years, and 69.7% are women. The most frequent level of education is the intermediate (43.8%), one third have a higher degree (33.8%), and 22.4% have only a basic education or no formal education at all. The major difficulty to participate in working life is the lack of opportunities (mean=3.25, somewhat difficult). The work ability is 6.73 in average.

The average age of **employees** is approximately 40 years; the majority are women, with a university education, who have, on average, been in their current job for around 28 years. The

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three main obstacles to take a next step in their career, or to take on a new role, new tasks, and new responsibilities at work are the barriers in the organisation, the lack of financial resources, and the lack of a good network of people who can help them with their career (mean between 2.5 and 2.7, somewhat difficult). The work ability baseline mean is 8.24.

Table 2: Baseline characteristics for jobseekers and employees.

Population characteristics	Jobseekers		Employees (N=73)
	Participants in interventions (N=222)	Control group (N=39)	
	Means (SD) / Percentage (N)		Means (SD) / Percentage (N)
Age	28.6 (SD12.74)	19.1 (SD 4.07)	39.9 (SD 10.89)
Gender – women	68.5% (152)	76.9% (30)	63.0% (46)
Education – none/basic	22.4% (49)	76.9% (30)	1.4% (1)
Education – intermediate	43.8% (96)	23.1% (9)	27.5% (19)
Education – higher	33.8% (74)	0	71.0% (49)
Years of current employment	Not applicable	Not applicable	28.0 years (SD 7.35)
Obstacles (1-5 scale: 1=not at all, 5=very much) – jobseekers • Lack of job opportunities • Commuting difficulties for example: difficult transport connections, long distances • Lack of training and skills for example: language skills, lack of professional qualifications or outdated qualifications • Diminished work motivation or desire to work • Problems connected to health or functional capacity • Personal life situation for example: family, relatives, friends (caregiving, childcare • Other reason	3.25 (1.180) 2.23 (1.311) 2.10 (1.226) 1.84 (1.125) 1.68 (1.079) 1.68 (1.085) 2.74 (1.590)	3.29 (0.920) 2.21 (1.269) 2.22 (1.188) 2.41(1.188) 1.58 (1.057) 1.68 (1.013) 3.00 (2.828)	Not applicable
Obstacles (1-5 scale: 1=not at all, 5=very much)-employees: • Other reason • Barriers in my organisation or company-T0 • Lack of financial resources • Lack of a good network of people who can help me with my career • Little motivation to work on my career • Lack of training and skills • Personal life situation • Problems connected to health	Not applicable	Not applicable	2.82 (1.487) 2.70 (1.478) 2.61 (1.445) 2.55 (1.283) 2.43 (1.384) 2.35 (1.353) 2.00 (1.234) 1.91 (1.308)
Work Ability (0-completely unable to work to 10-work ability at its best)	6.73 (SD 2.61)	6.18 (SD 2.29)	8.24 (SD 1.43)

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Table 3: Results for jobseekers: number of jobseekers who found employment after the interventions at T2 or later.

Employment status	Number in follow-up	Number	Percentage
Not employed	8	1	12.5%
Found employment	8	4	50.0%
Entered training or work trial	8	1	12.5%
Received certificate/diploma/sub-diploma	8	2	25.0%
Type of contract (if applicable)	4*	4	100.0%
Other: apprenticeship/training scheme	1	1	100.0%

* The four respondents classified as having found employment had a recorded contract type; all four had a fixed-term contract.

Analysis:

- Found employment: 4/8 = 50.0%
- Not employed: 1/8 = 12.5%
- Entered training/work trial: 1/8 = 12.5%
- Certificate/diploma/sub-diploma: 2/8 = 25.0%

In addition, LL Évora created a Talent Pool after the interventions, and 50 of the 130 that participated in the interventions accepted to be enrolled. This platform intends to facilitate contact with employers and the entry into or return to the labour market.

The employment-related T2 responses show 5 “Yes” and 1 “No” for employment status, with one of the “Yes” cases also recorded as entering a training scheme. The two additional T2 certificate records bring the total relevant follow-up cases to 8.

Table 4: Primary outcomes: results for jobseekers on skills and self-efficacy (paired samples t test)

Outcome	T0 N, Mean (SD)	T1 N, Mean (SD)	T2 N, Mean (SD)	N, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)	Effect size Cohen's dz	p-value
Skills (0–1)	200, 0.55 (0.20)	96, 0.57 (0.20)	12, 0.50 (0.15)	95, +0.018	0.095	0.066
Self-efficacy (0–1)	211, 0.79 (0.16)	89, 0.80 (0.15)	10, 0.81 (0.07)	89, +0.004	0.099	0.715
Job-search self-efficacy (0–1)	177, 0.68 (0.16)	69, 0.69 (0.16)	8, 0.72 (0.09)	67, +0.027	0.139	0.118

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Table 4 presents the results of the primary outcomes on skills and self-efficacy. Skills and job-search self-efficacy increased modestly between T0 and T1, while general self-efficacy remained essentially unchanged. None of these changes reached p<.05 and the effect size is small. The very small T2 samples mean that the apparent T2 values should not be interpreted as evidence of sustained change.

The secondary outcomes are presented in Tabel 5. The motivation result is close to conventional statistical significance (p=.054) and indicates a small positive change with a small effect size (Cohen's dz = 0.121). Job-seeking activity showed no change in the matched T0–T1 sample. The work ability increase is statistically significant and stands out as a large effect size (p = 0.002; Cohen's dz = 1.88)

Table 5: Secondary outcomes: results for jobseekers (paired samples t test)

Outcome	T0 N, Mean (SD)	T1 N, Mean (SD)	T2 N, Mean (SD)	N, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)	Cohen's dz	p-value
Motivation / career identity	210, 0.80 (0.17)	85, 0.84 (0.15)	12, 0.85 (0.11)	85, +0.026	0.121	0.054
Job-seeking activity	188, 2.83 (4.5)	73, 1.70 (4.08)	7, 1.00 (1.29)	70, 0.000	1.703	1.000
Job-search attitude	151, 0.56 (0.16)	57, 0.56 (0.15)	6, 0.57 (0.20)	53, +0.010	0.073	0.313
Work Ability (0–10)	212, 6.73 (2.61)	88, 7.42 (2.12)	13, 6.38 (2.63)	87, +0.644	1.880	0.002
Mental health problems (0-1)	150, 0.32 (0.22)	72, 0.29 (0.21)	6, 0.28 (0.20)	70, -0.021	0.122	0.152

T2 shows a high job-seeking activity, however this information is regarding only 13 participants that have T2 observations. This is the clearest positive result in the current Portuguese jobseeker data.

Table 6: Results for employees: number of employees that took on new tasks, roles, responsibilities or moved to another function at T2 or later.

Indicator	Number in follow-up	Number	Percentage
Took on new tasks, roles, responsibilities	3	3	100.0%
Moved to another function (upward/sideward)	3	3	100.0%
Participated in development activities last 6 months	3	1	33.3%

The employee dataset contains 73 employees in total. For the follow-up analysis, 3 employees have T1 and/or T2 mobility information:

- Mobility 1 – New tasks/roles/responsibilities: 3/3
- Mobility 2 – Moved to another function: 3/3
- Mobility 3 – Development activities: 1/3

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For the third indicator, only one of the three follow-up employees has a recorded "Yes" response for participation in development activities.

Note: The follow-up population comprises employees with available T1 and/or T2 information (n=3). Percentages are calculated using this follow-up population as the denominator. Given the small follow-up sample, results should be interpreted as descriptive findings.

Table 7: Primary outcomes: results for employees regarding self-efficacy (paired samples t test)

Outcome	T0 N, Mean (SD)	T1 N, Mean (SD)	T2 N, Mean (SD)	N, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)	Cohen's dz	p-value
Self-efficacy (0–1)	67, 0.83 (0.131)	19, 0.75 (0.219)	Not interpretable	19, −0.053	0.155	0.152
Job progression self-efficacy (0–1)	39, 0.81 (0.178)	14, 0.73 (0.303)	Not interpretable	12, −0.072	0.313	0.446
Skills	*Not available as a comparable employee scale*	—	—	—	—	—

The employee's results show a small decline in the two self-efficacy measures, but neither change is statistically significant, and both revealed small effect sizes. Given the matched samples of only 19 and 12 participants, these estimates are highly uncertain and should not be interpreted as evidence that the interventions reduced self-efficacy.

Table 8: Secondary outcomes for employees (paired samples t test)

Outcome	T0 N, Mean (SD)	T1 N, Mean (SD)	T2 N, Mean (SD)	N, mean difference T1-T0 (only for complete pairs)	Cohen's dz	p-value
Organisational mobility (0-1)	69, 0.57 (0.252)	19, 0.58 (0.221)	Not interpretable	19, −0.580	0.140	0.187
Career planning (0-1)	67, 0.73 (0.228)	20, 0.63 (0.267)	Not interpretable	19, −0.039	0.212	0.428
Job satisfaction (0-1)	59, 0.65 (0.212)	18, 0.73 (0.151)	Not interpretable	18, +0.001	0.229	0.989
Work Ability (0–10)	70, 8.24 (1.429)	20, 7.70 (1.174)	Not interpretable	19, +0.158	0.688	0.331
Mental health problems (0-1)	50, 0.24 (0.196)	13, 0.18 (0.134)	Not interpretable	11, -0.022	0.092	0.444

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The employee results therefore provide no statistically significant evidence of T0–T1 change. Work Ability increased modestly but with a moderate effect size, while organisational mobility, career planning and self-efficacy decreased slightly. The job satisfaction stayed almost constant. None of these differences were statistically significant.

1.4.2 Answering the research questions using quantitative analyses

Jobseekers

The Portuguese quantitative data provide preliminary evidence of positive change among jobseekers following participation in the Living Lab intervention package. Among participants with paired T0–T1 observations, Work Ability increased significantly from 6.79 to 7.44, representing a mean increase of 0.64 points with a very large effect size (p=.002; Cohen's dz=1.88). Skills, motivation, self-efficacy, job-search attitude and job-search self-efficacy also increased, although these changes did not reach conventional statistical significance and present small effect sizes.

These findings suggest that the intervention package may contribute particularly to participants' perceived capacity to work and, to a lesser extent, to skills and motivational resources. However, the analysis is exploratory. The absence of a sufficiently complete longitudinal dataset and the limited number of matched observations prevent strong causal conclusions.

Employees

The quantitative evidence for employees is currently inconclusive. The employee dataset contains 73 participants, but the matched T0–T1 samples for the principal outcomes are generally between 12 and 19 participants. No employee outcome reached conventional statistical significance. Work Ability increased slightly, while self-efficacy and job-progression self-efficacy decreased slightly.

Consequently, the current data do not allow us to conclude that the intervention package produced measurable improvements in employee outcomes.

Mobility effects

The third research question cannot yet be answered adequately from the current quantitative data. T2 follow-up is too sparse to establish whether jobseekers entered employment or whether employees experienced upward/sideward mobility, changes in tasks or responsibilities. The available T2 observations should therefore be treated as insufficient for estimating population-level mobility effects.

Quantitative conclusion

The Portuguese quantitative findings provide preliminary evidence of positive change among jobseekers, most notably in perceived Work Ability. Evidence for employees is inconclusive, and the available follow-up data are insufficient to assess longer-term employment and organisational mobility outcomes. The findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory evidence of potential intervention effects rather than as causal estimates.

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1.5 Realist evaluation results in Portugal

The Portuguese Living Lab applied the ENGINE principles through the involvement of relevant stakeholders in the development and implementation of the intervention activities. Collaboration between ISCTE, Living Lab partners, trainers and participating organisations supported the adaptation of the intervention package to the needs and characteristics of the target groups and local contexts.
The available evidence indicates that stakeholder involvement included elements of co-design, co-implementation and iterative feedback. However, these forms of collaboration should be distinguished from formal peer-learning activities. While stakeholders and participating organisations contributed to the exchange of experiences and to the adaptation of activities, the available documentation does not provide sufficient evidence to characterise these interactions as a formally structured peer-learning process.
Accordingly, peer learning is not considered a distinct, formally implemented intervention mechanism in the Portuguese Living Lab unless further documentary evidence confirms otherwise. This distinction is important to ensure that the realist evaluation reflects the documented implementation practices rather than inferring mechanisms from general stakeholder collaboration.

Realist (Qualitative) evaluation:

The realist evaluation examines how and under what circumstances the Living Lab approach contributes to improved labour-market opportunities and progression for employees and jobseekers facing barriers to employment or career development. Following a realist evaluation perspective, the analysis focuses on the interaction between contexts, mechanisms and outcomes (CMOs), recognising that interventions may work differently for different groups and in different institutional, organisational and regional contexts.

Coalition-level evaluation

How do regional labour-market coalitions work to stimulate upward or sideward mobility among employees facing barriers to progression and create traction for the labour-market entry of jobseekers facing barriers to employment, for whom, and under what circumstances?
The coalition-level analysis addresses three questions:

1. What key mechanisms drive coalition formation and functioning?
2. Which regional and national contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms?
3. What outcomes do these coalitions produce?

The analysis considers how coalition governance, partner composition, leadership, participation, employer engagement, commitment and group cohesion influence collaboration and the capacity of the coalition to support the objectives of the Living Labs.

Individual-level evaluation

How do training and development interventions work to stimulate upward mobility among employees and labour-market entry among jobseekers facing barriers to progression or employment, for whom, and under what circumstances?

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Employees

The realist evaluation addresses the following questions:

1. What key mechanisms drive interventions aimed at training and development for employees?
2. Which contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms?
3. What outcomes do these interventions for employees generate?

The analysis considers how training and development activities may influence employees' skills, self-efficacy, career planning, organisational mobility and perceived capacity for progression, while taking into account the organisational and individual circumstances that may enable or constrain these processes.

Jobseekers

The realist evaluation addresses the following questions:

1. What key mechanisms drive interventions aimed at training and development for jobseekers?
2. Which contextual circumstances enable or constrain these mechanisms?
3. What outcomes do these interventions for jobseekers generate?

The analysis considers how interventions may influence jobseekers' skills, motivation, self-efficacy, job-search capabilities, work ability and attitudes towards employment, while examining how individual, organisational and regional circumstances shape these processes.

ENGINE implementation question

A complementary implementation question is:
How, and to what extent, is the ENGINE approach implemented in practice across the Living Labs, and how do contextual conditions enable or constrain its implementation?
The evaluation examines how the ENGINE approach is translated into practice across different Living Lab contexts through its three core principles: coalition building, multi-level intervention packages, and co-design and co-implementation.

1. Coalition building

Coalition building is examined by analysing how governance structures, partner composition, leadership processes, member participation, employer engagement, commitment and group cohesion shape coalition functioning over time.
These elements may operate as contextual conditions or mechanisms, depending on how they influence actors' engagement, expectations and collaborative behaviour. The analysis therefore considers not only whether particular coalition structures are present, but also how and under what circumstances they contribute to sustained collaboration and the development of the Living Lab approach.

2. Multi-level intervention packages

The evaluation examines the extent to which interventions operate across different levels,

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including jobseekers, employees, organisations and the regional/system level, and whether these levels are aligned and mutually reinforcing, as hypothesised by the ENGINE approach. Particular attention is given to employee training, development and upskilling activities, as well as jobseeker activation, employability and labour-market matching activities. The analysis considers whether and how interventions at different levels interact and contribute to the intended outcomes.

3. Co-design and co-implementation

Co-design and co-implementation are examined by analysing how these principles are reflected in practice, including:

- stakeholder involvement in the development and adaptation of interventions;
- monitoring and feedback mechanisms;
- opportunities for iterative learning and adjustment;
- collaboration between Living Lab partners, trainers, participating organisations and target groups; and
- the extent to which participant and stakeholder experiences inform subsequent implementation.

The evaluation distinguishes between formal co-design and co-implementation processes and more informal forms of consultation, feedback and adaptation. While collaboration and exchange between stakeholders may create opportunities for learning, the available evidence does not provide sufficient basis to treat peer learning as a formally implemented or independently identifiable intervention mechanism unless this is confirmed by additional qualitative or documentary evidence.
This approach ensures that the realist evaluation remains grounded in the evidence available from the Portuguese Living Labs and avoids inferring mechanisms that were not explicitly implemented or documented.

Table 9: Overview of qualitative data collected in Portugal

Portugal						
	Individual level: jobseeker		Individual level: employees		Coalition level	
	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing	Phase 1: theory developing	Phase 2: theory refinement / testing
Interviews	0	24	0	21	9 (incl. trainers)	14 (incl. trainers)
Focus group (in brackets please indicate the number of participants)	0	0	0	0	0	1 (10 participants)

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Table 10 presents the research activities conducted and distinguishing between three analytical levels: individual-level research with jobseekers, individual-level research with employees, and coalition-level research. Within each level, activities were conducted across Phase 1 (theory development) and Phase 2 (theory refinement/testing).

At the individual level focusing on jobseekers and employees, the research comprised 24 interviews during Phase 1 and a further 21 interviews during Phase 2, resulting in 45 Jobseekers and employee interviews across the two phases. No focus groups were conducted at this level.

At the coalition level, the research involved 9 interviews, including trainers, during Phase 1, followed by 14 interviews, including trainers, during Phase 2. This represents a total of 23 coalition-level interviews, including trainers, across the two phases. In addition, one focus group involving 10 participants was conducted during Phase 2 at the coalition level.

The Portuguese Living Labs comprised 68 interviews across the three analytical levels and research phases: 45 interviews with jobseekers and employees, 23 interviews at the coalition level (including trainers). In addition, one coalition-level focus group with 10 participants was conducted during Phase 2. The distribution of the empirical activities demonstrates a clear progression from theory development in Phase 1 to theory refinement and testing in Phase 2, with the largest volume of data collection concentrated at the jobseekers and employee levels and a substantial contribution from coalition-level stakeholders.

1.5.1 Coalition-Level Findings: Context, Mechanisms and Outcomes

1.5.1.1 Coalition-Level General Context

The SYNCLUSIVE initiative in Portugal operates within a multi-tiered regional coalition framework coordinated by ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa alongside governmental, educational, research, and private actors. The overarching goal is enhancing the labour market inclusion of vulnerable groups, particularly young people, through digital skills, entrepreneurial training, and mentorship programs.

The coalition's structure is anchored in two foundational frameworks:

- **Community Coalition Action Theory (CCAT):** Guides the lifecycle stages of formation, maintenance, and institutionalization.
- **LISO Methodology (Learning, Innovation, Sustainability, Outcomes):** Drives problem-solving, curriculum adaptation, and impact measurement.

  Because regional labour markets and sectoral priorities vary across Portugal, the coalition comprises three distinct regional interventions and one national sub-network:

Intervention 1: Lisboa Coalition

- **Context:** Urban labor market; focus on higher education, research integration, and tech-driven integration.

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- **Composition:** 7 members (ISCTE, IEFP, Rede Emprega – CML, Casa do Artista, TermoCerto, Audax, Swatter).
- **Key Conditions:** Strong academic, public-sector, and temporary work agency engagement. However, it faces barriers due to limited involvement from primary employer associations and a mismatch between theoretical training and workplace experience expectations.

Intervention 2: Évora Coalition

- **Context:** Rural and semi-urban labour market; focus on bridging the urban-rural digital divide.
- **Composition:** 6 members (ISCTE, PACT, IEFP, Municipality of Évora, Association of Entrepreneurs, Consultancy company – Recruitment & Selection).
- **Key Conditions:** Integration of digital competencies into traditional regional industries (agriculture, wine, olive oil, aeronautics, commerce). Constrained by regional funding limitations, infrastructure/digital divide issues, and resource scarcities.

Intervention 3: Lagoa Coalition

- **Context:** Service- and tourism-oriented regional economy.
- **Composition:** 6 members (ISCTE, Municipality of Lagoa, Turismo de Portugal, Hotel Manager, Timming, IEFP).
- **Key Conditions:** Focus on smart cities, tourism innovation, cybersecurity, and digital startups. Enables engagement via digital platforms, though limited access to structured mentorship programs and startup financing present persistent barriers.

Sub-network: Digital Coalitions (National Scope)

- **Context:** Cross-sectoral national tech framework.
- **Composition:** 7 member networks/entities (IT, Sustainability, Tourism, Training/Education networks, ISCTE, IEFP, Rede do Empresário).
- **Key Conditions:** Focuses on scalable technical skills (Python, MS Excel, 3D printing) and career mobility. Constrained by consistent challenges in long-term employer retention and job placement linkage.

1.5.2 Coalition Formation

During initial setup, mechanisms were activated to bring disparate actors (academic, municipal, public employment, and private sector) into a shared operating space.

- **Mechanism (Shared Problem Recognition & Perceived Mutual Benefit): IF**: Establishing a collective understanding of youth employment gaps and digital literacy shortages triggered a recognition of mutual benefit among participating entities.
- **Stakeholder Response: Then** Stakeholders aligned early on shared goals, overcoming traditional organizational siloes and increasing their willingness to pool resources, technical expertise, and networks.

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- **Outcome:** Rapid establishment of regional coalition sub-units, formal participation commitments, and initial program design within Lisbon, Évora, Lagoa, and national networks.
- **Enabling/Constraining Context:**

National: Support from public bodies like IEFP and alignment with national digital transition policies.

Regional: Pre-existing relationships between educational institutions (ISCTE), municipal actors, and incubators. Early engagement of key municipal actors prior to formal structuring enabled smooth formation, whereas low initial representation of employer associations acted as a constraint.

1.5.2.1 Coalition Sustainability

A. Short-Term Sustainability: Maintenance

- **Mechanism (Ownership, Transparency, and Reciprocity):** Providing structured leadership via ISCTE while inviting members to co-design session content activated a sense of direct ownership and reciprocity. Regular communications (newsletters, updates) maintained transparency.
- **Stakeholder Response:** Members maintained ongoing engagement, actively participating in sector-specific sub-groups and regular progress reflections. Employers engaged more readily when interventions offered direct, practical value to their organizational operations.
- **Outcome:** Active maintenance of coalition operations, delivery of targeted digital skills courses (e.g., Python, Excel, Business Models), and expansion into secondary school partnerships.
- **Enabling/Constraining Context:**

Enabling: Strong, clear leadership by ISCTE; subdivision into sector-based working groups; visible early utility of training schemes.

Constraining: Frequent leadership or coordinator turnover in member institutions created management inconsistency. Hesitancy among SMEs regarding ROI on digital training limited broader employer participation.

B. Longer-Term Sustainability: Institutionalization

- **Mechanism (Strategic Alignment and Mutual Dependence):** Aligning coalition digital training directly with regional economic strategies (e.g., Évora's aggrotech/aeronautics or Lagoa's smart tourism) fosters mutual dependence between local authorities, training providers, and businesses.
- **Stakeholder Response:** Key institutions move from viewing the coalition as an ad-hoc project to integrating its methodologies into standard operating procedures and local innovation ecosystems.

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- **Outcome:** Sustained collaboration pathways, integration of technology incubators and business associations into regular data-sharing schedules, and formal secondary school entrepreneurship programs.
- **Enabling/Constraining Context:**

Enabling: Stable resource allocation for the lead coordinating partner (ISCTE); integration into regional innovation hubs (e.g., PACT in Évora).

Constraining: Regional infrastructure deficits (e.g., digital divide in rural Alentejo); lack of dedicated long-term funding past external grant lifecycles.

1.5.2.2 Coalition Institutionalization

Institutionalization represents the embedding of coalition-developed practices into permanent governance structures and organizational routines.

- **Mechanism (Normalization and Legitimacy):** As the LISO framework and CCAT process demonstrate success, collaborative practices become normalized as standard regional governance tools. The academic legitimacy of ISCTE combined with public employment authority (IEFP) mandates solidifies trust.
- **Stakeholder Response:** Organizations formalize cross-sector cooperation, embed digital mentorship and micro-credentials into standard offerings, and assign permanent institutional representatives.
- **Outcome:** Formalization of multi-actor governance structures that persist beyond project cycles; institutional adoption of modular digital literacy curricula; established public-private feedback loops.
- **Enabling/Constraining Context:** Enabled by formal succession planning, multi-representative institutional models, and alignment with national digital transition strategies. Constrained by municipal leadership shifts, risk-averse traditional business cultures, and fragmented regional funding streams.

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Summary of Coalition-Level CMO Configurations

Table 10: CMO Summary Table

	Context – Enabling / Barrier Conditions	Mechanism	Stakeholder Response	Coalition-Level Outcome
Formation	**Enabling:** Public agency support (IEFP); existing regional networks. **Barrier:** Low employer association representation.	Shared problem recognition; perceived mutual benefit.	Stakeholders align on goals, build trust, and pool technical expertise.	Regional coalitions established within 3 hubs and 1 national tech network.
Short-Term Sustainability (Maintenance)	**Enabling:** Dedicated academic leadership (ISCTE); sector-based subdivisions; regular progress updates. **Barrier:** Leadership turnover; SME ROI uncertainty.	Ownership; reciprocity; communication transparency.	Members actively shape content; higher engagement when direct organizational benefits are clear.	Sustained monthly operations; delivery of digital training modules; secondary school expansion.
Long-Term Sustainability	**Enabling:** Strategic alignment with local economies (e.g., agritech, smart tourism). **Barrier:** Digital divide in rural regions; resource limitations.	Strategic alignment; mutual dependence.	Integration of coalition frameworks into regular workforce development routines.	Embedded mentorship frameworks; stable cross-sector networks with incubators and hubs.
Institutionalization	**Enabling:** Formal succession plans; multi-representative engagement; academic-public legitimacy. **Barrier:** Municipal political shifts; traditional business risk-aversion.	Normalization of collaboration; institutional legitimacy.	Permanent assignment of roles; formal adoption of co-designed training/mentorship structures.	Permanent multi-actor governance structures and standardized digital mobility pathways.

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Illustrative Configuration: Overcoming Employer Engagement Barriers via Structured Co-Design

Context (C): In regional hubs like Lisbon and Évora, where initial employer participation was limited and businesses expressed hesitation regarding the ROI of training inexperienced young jobseekers...

Mechanism (M): The introduction of sector-based coalition subdivisions and co-designed training programs (combining technical tools like Python/Excel with mentorship) triggered **perceived mutual benefit** and **increased trust** in the labour pipeline.

Outcome (O): This changed employer perceptions, leading to active involvement in tailoring curricula, creating mentorship pathways, and establishing direct job placement opportunities for vulnerable youth.

Evidence Quote:

"Employers and other stakeholders tend to engage more actively in direct interventions benefiting their organizations rather than broad coalition activities. Clear communication about the SYNCLUSIVE project, its benefits, and successful case studies is essential to securing employer participation. Sector-based coalition subdivisions improved meeting effectiveness and directed efforts more efficiently."

1.5.3 Individual level

1.5.3.1 Individual-Level General Context

To evaluate the individual-level findings across the Portuguese Living Lab, qualitative evidence was considered across the four regional sub-coalitions: Lisboa, Évora, Lagoa, and the National Digital Coalition. Although these regional hubs operate in different economic and institutional contexts, ranging from urban academic and technology ecosystems to rural agritech and service- or tourism-oriented settings, the cross-case analysis makes it possible to identify recurring Context–Mechanism–Outcome patterns. It also highlights contextual variations, such as differences between predominantly individual online learning and structured face-to-face group settings, which influence whether and how particular mechanisms are activated.
Accordingly, the configurations presented below are associated with the participant profile for which the complete relationship between context, mechanism, and outcome was most clearly supported. A configuration is treated as shared only when a sufficiently similar relationship was identified among both jobseekers and employees.

1.5.3.2 Training Context: Skill-Building Programmes in Transitions and Uncertainty

The short-term training interventions evaluated within the Portuguese Living Lab aimed to develop technical, digital, entrepreneurial, and employability-related competencies among jobseekers and employees.

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- Core Competencies: Technical programming, including Python; digital and productivity tools, particularly MS Excel; 3D modelling and printing; design; business models; entrepreneurship; and job-search preparation, including CV development, motivation letters, and elevator pitches.
- Delivery Formats: Blended formats combining synchronous face-to-face sessions in institutional or school settings with online learning activities and digital modules.
- Pedagogical Framework: Hands-on practical tasks, project-based learning, opportunities for peer interaction, and guidance and feedback from trainers.
- Key Contextual Variation: Communication channels, trainer responsiveness, opportunities for peer exchange, course duration, and the balance between theoretical explanation and practical work varied across interventions. These differences affected participants' experiences of support, control, relevance, and competence.

1.5.3.3 Jobseekers' Context: Heterogeneous Pathways into Employment

Jobseekers included young people in educational transitions, participants attempting to enter the labour market, and unemployed people seeking new employment opportunities.

- Structural Conditions: Participants' pathways were shaped by different combinations of formal qualifications, limited practical experience, unemployment, and uncertainty about how acquired skills could be translated into employment opportunities. For some, training took place during the transition from education to work; for others, it formed part of an attempt to re-enter the labour market or reconsider their occupational direction.
- Individual-Level Vulnerabilities: Participants reported varying degrees of low confidence in their professional skills, hesitation in expressing doubts publicly, uncertainty about career goals, limited practical experience, and restricted access to professional networks.
- Motivation Dynamics: Although jobseekers generally demonstrated a willingness to develop new skills, their motivation could be fragile and sensitive to initial setbacks, logistical difficulties, limited support, or poorly organised delivery. Some participants also expressed uncertainty regarding the value of short-term training credentials and their translation into concrete employment opportunities.
- Participation Constraints: Educational commitments, family responsibilities, job-search activities, digital access problems, and difficulties contacting trainers could affect regular attendance and continuity of participation.

1.5.3.4 Employees' Context: Upskilling, Professional Development, and Future Orientation

Employees participated in training from a comparatively more stable labour market position but encountered different forms of uncertainty related to technological change, professional development, and the future relevance of their existing skills.

- Professional Development Context: For employees, participation was primarily connected to upskilling, the acquisition of technical or digital competencies, and

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preparation for possible future professional responsibilities. Training could also provide an opportunity to explore areas of interest not fully developed in their current roles.

- Confidence and Applied Competence: Employees' accounts indicated that completing unfamiliar practical tasks could challenge their initial assumptions about their abilities. Visible achievement and the successful application of new skills contributed to a stronger sense of professional competence and adaptability.
- Motivation Dynamics: Engagement was strengthened when employees perceived the content as relevant to their current work, possible future responsibilities, or broader career aspirations. The trust placed in participants and the opportunity to assume responsibility for practical projects could also encourage a sense of ownership and professional validation.
- Organisational and Personal Constraints: Course duration, scheduling, limited opportunities for practice, and the availability of trainer or peer support could facilitate or constrain learning. For employees, however, the interviews provide stronger evidence of perceived competence and professional confidence than of actual changes in roles, responsibilities, or organisational mobility.

1.5.3.5 Core CMOs at the Individual Level

The individual-level analysis identified four core Context–Mechanism–Outcome configurations. These retain the configurations developed in the initial analysis while distinguishing more clearly between jobseekers and employees. One configuration was identified across both profiles, whereas the remaining configurations were more directly associated with either jobseekers or employees.

CMO 1: *Shared Learning That Rebuilds Confidence*
Primary profile association: Shared by jobseekers and employees

Mechanism: normalisation of difficulties, perceived safety, and self-efficacy shift

Structured peer interaction exposes participants to the questions, learning processes, and difficulties experienced by others. Observing peers encounter and overcome similar challenges allows participants to interpret their own difficulties as a normal part of learning rather than as evidence of personal inadequacy. This normalisation strengthens self-efficacy and makes participants more willing to ask questions, contribute to group activities, and persist when difficulties arise.
Among jobseekers, this mechanism was particularly relevant where limited practical experience and low confidence made participants hesitant to express doubts publicly. As one jobseeker explained, "other people's questions end up being mine too," illustrating how peer interaction enabled learning even when participants did not feel sufficiently confident to raise questions themselves. Among employees, group support similarly helped participants manage unfamiliar or demanding tasks, with one employee emphasising that the group was fundamental in supporting those who were experiencing greater difficulty.

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Outcomes

Increased self-confidence, more active participation during training sessions, greater persistence when facing difficulties, and sustained engagement with the learning process. Among jobseekers, this could also strengthen willingness to continue developing skills relevant to labour market entry. Among employees, it supported more confident participation in professional learning and collaborative activities. Conversely, limited peer interaction could reinforce isolation, passivity, and disengagement.
Increased self-confidence heightened active participation during training sessions, sustained course engagement, and willingness to pursue further skill development. Conversely, a lack of peer exposure fosters feelings of isolation, passivity, and higher dropout rates.

Facilitating Context Factors

Learning environments that actively promote peer exchange; structured opportunities for collaborative work; group discussion spaces; and session formats that allow participants to learn from questions and difficulties raised by others.

Hindering Context Factors

Isolated or poorly facilitated learning environments; limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction; weak communication between participants; and low initial confidence that remains unaddressed within the group.

Overarching CMO 1:

If jobseekers or employees enter training with limited confidence in their ability to complete unfamiliar tasks, then learning formats that provide structured peer interaction enable them to recognise that difficulties are shared and manageable, because observing and collaborating with others normalises uncertainty and strengthens self-efficacy, which leads to more active participation, greater persistence, and sustained engagement in learning.

CMO 2: *Tangible Practice, Tangible Confidence: Hands-On Tasks and Visible Progress*
Primary profile association: Employees

Mechanism (Sense of Mastery and Applied Competence)

Hands-on activities requiring employees to produce or complete concrete outputs provide direct and visible evidence of skill acquisition. Through practical experimentation, project development, and the successful completion of unfamiliar tasks, employees are able to recognise their own capacity to learn and apply new competencies. This experience generates a sense of mastery and allows initial uncertainty to be reinterpreted as something that can be overcome through practice, collaboration, and guidance.
This mechanism was evident in employees' accounts of successfully completing activities they had initially perceived as difficult or beyond their existing capabilities. As one employee described it, an important result was "being able to do things I thought I'd never be able to." The significance of the practical output therefore extended beyond the acquisition of a particular technical skill: it provided evidence of professional capability and adaptability.

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Outcomes

Stronger confidence in applying newly acquired skills; increased willingness to engage with unfamiliar technologies or tasks; greater perceived professional adaptability; and a stronger sense of capability within the workplace. Where training remained predominantly abstract or did not allow sufficient time for practical application, confidence gains were more limited.

Facilitating Context Factors

Course designs that emphasise learning by doing; practical tasks connected to employees' professional environments; opportunities to develop visible outputs; adequate time for experimentation and improvement; and trainer feedback that helps participants recognise their progress.

Hindering Context Factors

Abstract or predominantly theoretical content; insufficient time to complete or improve practical outputs; overly rapid delivery; and weak connections between training activities and potential professional application.

Overarching CMO 2:

If employees participate in training involving skills or technologies with which they have limited previous experience, then hands-on activities and the production of visible outputs enable them to recognise their capacity to learn and apply new competencies, because successful task completion generates a sense of mastery and applied competence, which leads to stronger professional self-confidence, increased adaptability, and greater willingness to use new skills in future work-related contexts.

CMO 3: *Friction Down, Participation Up: Reliable Logistics and Accessible Support*
Primary profile association: Jobseekers

Mechanism (Predictability and Control)

Minimising organisational friction through predictable scheduling, functional platforms, clear communication, and accessible trainer support allows jobseekers to integrate training into their daily lives. When technical or logistical difficulties are addressed promptly, participants perceive the course as manageable and retain a sense of control over their participation. By contrast, unresolved problems can generate frustration and reinforce the perception that continued participation requires more effort than the expected benefits justify.

This mechanism was especially important for jobseekers combining training with education, family responsibilities, job-search activities, or other personal commitments. Problems with access links and the absence of effective support could result in missed sessions and disrupted learning. As one jobseeker reported, "I missed three classes because I couldn't access the link. Then I had no way to contact anyone."

Outcomes

More consistent attendance, continuity between sessions, sustained engagement, and a greater likelihood of course completion. Persistent logistical or technical barriers could instead

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lead to fragmented attendance, loss of learning continuity, frustration, and premature withdrawal.

Facilitating Context Factors

Clear and responsive communication channels; predictable scheduling; course timetables compatible with educational, personal, or job-search commitments; accessible trainer support; and reliable digital platforms.

Hindering Context Factors

Competing personal or academic obligations; unreliable technical infrastructure; unclear access procedures; changes communicated at short notice; and slow or unavailable responses when participants encounter difficulties.

Overarching CMO 3:

If jobseekers combine training with educational, personal, or job-search commitments and have limited capacity to absorb additional organisational difficulties, then predictable schedules, reliable access arrangements, and responsive support reduce the practical burden of participation, because these resources preserve participants' sense of control and prevent frustration from accumulating, which leads to greater continuity, sustained engagement, and a higher likelihood of course completion.

CMO 4: *Interest Alignment Fuels Engagement: Connecting Content to Aspiration*
Primary profile association: Jobseekers

Mechanism (Perceived Personal Value and Internal Investment)

When training content is connected to jobseekers' existing interests, occupational curiosity, or developing career aspirations, participants are more likely to perceive the learning process as personally meaningful. The training is then interpreted not merely as an external requirement or another short-term credential, but as an investment in a possible professional future. This perceived value encourages participants to devote greater attention and effort to learning and to persist when tasks become challenging.

For some jobseekers, the relevance of the training confirmed an existing occupational interest. For others, exposure to practical activities helped them assess whether a particular field corresponded to their capabilities and aspirations. Consequently, the outcome was not always commitment to a predetermined career path: the training could also support a more informed reconsideration or clarification of occupational direction.

Outcomes

Deeper engagement with course content, greater persistence during difficult tasks, stronger confidence, improved retention of relevant skills, and a clearer understanding of possible professional directions. Where participants perceived little connection between the course and their interests or realistic employment opportunities, engagement tended to remain superficial and the perceived value of the training was reduced.

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Facilitating Context Factors

Pre-existing curiosity about the training domain; visible connections between course content and occupations; practical examples of professional application; opportunities to explore different roles; and content related to viable employment or further training pathways.

Hindering Context Factors

Limited initial interest; weak connections between training content and participants' aspirations; superficial curriculum content; and a perceived disconnect between acquired skills and realistic local labour market opportunities.

Overarching CMO 4:

If jobseekers enter training with an existing interest in a particular field or uncertainty about their future occupational direction, then content that makes its professional relevance and practical applications visible strengthens perceived personal value, because participants interpret learning as an opportunity to invest in and assess possible career pathways, which leads to greater engagement, persistence, skill development, and clearer occupational orientation.

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Table 11: Summary Matrix of Individual-Level CMO Configurations

Individual Stage / CMO	Context - Enabling and Barrier Conditions	Mechanism	Individual-Level Outcome
CMO 1: Shared Learning That Rebuilds Confidence **Primary profile association** *Shared by jobseekers and employees*	**Enabling:** Structured opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative work; group discussion spaces; learning formats that allow participants to learn from questions and difficulties raised by others. **Barriers:** Isolated or poorly facilitated learning environments; limited spontaneous exchange; weak communication; low initial confidence that remains unaddressed.	**Normalisation of Difficulties and Self-Efficacy** **Shift:** Recognising that others experience similar difficulties reduces feelings of personal inadequacy and strengthens participants' confidence in their ability to learn.	Increased self-confidence, more active participation, greater persistence when facing difficulties, and sustained engagement with learning.
CMO 2: Tangible Practice, Tangible Confidence: Hands-On Tasks and Visible Progress **Primary profile association** *Employees*	**Enabling:** Hands-on activities; practical experimentation; concrete technical or project outputs; adequate time for practice and improvement; trainer feedback; connection with possible professional applications. **Barriers:** Abstract or predominantly theoretical content; insufficient opportunities for practice; overly rapid delivery; weak connections between training activities and professional contexts.	**Sense of Mastery and Applied Competence:** Successfully completing unfamiliar practical tasks provides visible evidence of employees' ability to learn and apply new competencies.	Stronger professional self-confidence, increased perceived adaptability, a greater sense of capability within the workplace, and greater willingness to use newly acquired skills in future work-related contexts.
CMO 3: Friction Down, Participation Up: Reliable Logistics and Accessible Support **Primary profile association** *Jobseekers*	**Enabling:** Predictable schedules; reliable access arrangements and digital platforms; clear communication; responsive trainer support. **Barriers:** Unclear communication; technical or access problems; competing educational, personal, or job-search commitments; unavailable or delayed support.	**Predictability and Control:** Reliable arrangements reduce the practical burden of participation and allow jobseekers to perceive training as manageable within their daily lives.	More consistent attendance, greater learning continuity, sustained engagement, and a greater likelihood of course completion. Conversely, unresolved barriers may produce fragmented attendance, frustration, and withdrawal.

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CMO 4: Interest Alignment Fuels Engagement: Connecting Content to Aspiration **Primary profile association** *Jobseekers*	**Enabling:** Pre-existing curiosity; visible connections between training content and occupations; practical professional applications; alignment with career aspirations and viable employment or further-training pathways. **Barriers:** Limited initial interest; weak connections with participants' aspirations; superficial content; perceived disconnect between acquired skills and realistic employment opportunities.	**Perceived Personal Value and Internal Investment:** Participants interpret learning as an investment in, and an opportunity to assess, possible professional pathways.	Greater engagement, persistence during challenging tasks, skill development and retention, stronger confidence, and clearer occupational orientation.

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Overarching interpretation of individual-level CMOs

Taken together, the four individual-level CMO configurations identified across the Portuguese Living Lab point to distinct yet complementary causal pathways operating across different dimensions of the learning experience. The configurations should not be understood as four mechanisms operating identically for all participants. CMO 1 was identified across both jobseekers and employees, CMO 2 was more clearly supported among employees, and CMOs 3 and 4 were primarily associated with jobseekers.

The activation of these configurations also varied according to the characteristics of the regional interventions in Lisboa, Évora, Lagoa, and the National Digital Coalition, including their delivery formats, pedagogical organisation, opportunities for interaction, communication arrangements, and connections with particular economic and professional contexts.

1. Relational Dimension – Shared Learning (CMO 1; jobseekers and employees):

This shared configuration operates when structured interaction allows participants to observe how others approach unfamiliar tasks and experience similar difficulties. Such interaction normalises uncertainty and strengthens self-efficacy, encouraging participants to ask questions, participate more actively, and persist when challenges arise. Among jobseekers, this was particularly relevant where limited practical experience and low expressive confidence inhibited participation. Among employees, peer support helped participants manage unfamiliar tasks and engage more confidently in professional learning.

- *Intervention Variation:* This mechanism was more readily activated in face-to-face and classroom-based interventions offering structured opportunities for peer exchange, such as school partnerships and local workshops. It was more constrained in predominantly individual online learning formats unless opportunities for group discussion, mutual support, and accessible communication were deliberately incorporated.

2. Instrumental Dimension – Tangible Practice and Mastery (CMO 2; employees):

Among employees, hands-on activities and the production of visible outputs provided concrete evidence of their ability to acquire and apply unfamiliar competencies. Practical accomplishment generated a sense of mastery and applied competence, allowing initial uncertainty to be reinterpreted as something that could be overcome through experimentation, guidance, and sustained effort. The principal outcome was therefore not immediate job-search readiness, but stronger professional self-confidence, perceived adaptability, and willingness to use newly acquired skills in future work-related contexts.

- *Intervention Variation:* The form taken by practical mastery depended on the content and sectoral orientation of the intervention. In technology-oriented settings, it could emerge through coding, data analysis, digital tools, or other technical outputs. In interventions connected to agritech, entrepreneurship, tourism, or smart-city development, it was more closely associated with the practical application of skills to sector-specific projects and challenges. Across these settings, sufficient time for experimentation and feedback was important for visible accomplishment to generate confidence.

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3. Organisational Dimension – Reduced Organisational Friction (CMO 3; jobseekers): For jobseekers, predictable schedules, reliable platforms, clear communication, and accessible support reduced the practical burden of participation. These conditions strengthened participants' sense of control and allowed training to be integrated with educational, personal, family, or job-search commitments. When organisational or technical problems remained unresolved, relatively minor disruptions could accumulate, producing fragmented attendance, frustration, loss of learning continuity, and possible withdrawal.

- *Intervention Variation:* The sources of organisational friction varied across delivery settings. In online or digitally mediated interventions, access procedures, platform reliability, and the availability of responsive communication channels were particularly important. In face-to-face and blended interventions, scheduling and compatibility with participants' other commitments assumed greater relevance. The decisive factor was therefore not the delivery format itself, but whether participants could access the training predictably and obtain timely support when difficulties arose.

4. Motivational Dimension –Perceived Relevance and Interest Alignment (CMO 4; jobseekers): For jobseekers, connecting training content with existing interests, occupational curiosity, or emerging career aspirations increased its perceived personal value. Participants were more likely to interpret the course as an investment in a possible professional future and to persist when its practical applications and links to realistic pathways were visible. This mechanism could confirm an existing occupational interest, but it could also help participants reconsider or clarify their professional direction.

- *Intervention Variation:* The basis of perceived relevance differed across interventions. In Lagoa, it could be connected to entrepreneurship, start-ups, tourism, and smart-city development. In the National Digital Coalition, relevance was more directly associated with aspirations involving digital and technology-related occupations. In Évora, it depended partly on whether digital or entrepreneurial skills could be related to locally significant sectors, including agriculture, commerce, and aeronautics. The mechanism was weakened where participants perceived a disconnect between course content and realistic employment or further-training opportunities.

Complementarity Across Profile-Specific Pathways

Although the four mechanisms are analytically complementary, they do not constitute a single sequential pathway experienced by every participant. Their relationships are better understood through the two participant profiles identified in the analysis:

1. **Among employees**, shared learning could provide relational support for engaging with unfamiliar tasks, while tangible practice transformed participation into visible accomplishment. Where these two configurations operated together, peer support facilitated experimentation and successful task completion strengthened professional confidence, adaptability, and willingness to apply new competencies.
2. **Among jobseekers**, shared learning could reduce hesitation and strengthen confidence, while reliable organisational arrangements supported continuity of

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participation and perceived career relevance sustained motivation. Where these configurations converged, participants were better able to remain engaged, persist through difficulties, develop relevant skills, and clarify possible occupational pathways.

The configurations may therefore reinforce one another within particular profiles and intervention settings, but their activation remains contingent rather than automatic. The presence of one mechanism does not imply that the others will necessarily be activated, nor that all participants will follow the same learning trajectory.
This differentiated pattern reflects the heterogeneity of the Portuguese Living Lab. Jobseekers faced uncertain transitions into or back into employment, often combined with limited practical experience, fragile confidence, and competing commitments. Employees approached training from a comparatively more stable labour market position, but faced challenges associated with upskilling, technological change, and future professional adaptability. Effective skill development therefore depended on the alignment between participants' profiles and the relational, practical, organisational, and motivational resources provided by each intervention.

The Reinforcing System of Mechanisms: Profile-Specific Pathways

Although the four CMOs are analytically distinct, the mechanisms they contain may reinforce one another when activated within the same participant profile and intervention context. The evidence does not, however, support a single sequential pathway in which all four configurations necessarily operate for every participant. Instead, two profile-specific patterns can be identified:

1. **Employee pathway – Shared Learning and Tangible Mastery:** Among employees, shared learning (CMO 1) can provide the relational support needed to approach unfamiliar activities, ask for assistance, and persist when difficulties arise. Tangible practice (CMO 2) can subsequently or simultaneously transform participation into visible accomplishment. When these configurations operate together, interaction with peers supports engagement in practical tasks, while successful task completion strengthens professional self-confidence, perceived adaptability, and willingness to apply new competencies in future work-related contexts.
2. **Jobseeker pathway – Shared Learning, Organisational Continuity, and Career Relevance:** Among jobseekers, shared learning (CMO 1) can reduce hesitation and strengthen confidence by normalising learning difficulties. Reduced organisational friction (CMO 3) helps preserve continuity by making participation compatible with educational, personal, family, or job-search commitments. Interest alignment (CMO 4) sustains engagement when participants recognise the content as relevant to their occupational aspirations or as useful for clarifying possible career pathways. Together, these configurations can support more active participation, persistence, course continuity, skill development, and clearer occupational orientation.

These pathways should not be interpreted as fixed stages or as combinations that are invariably activated. The presence of one configuration does not guarantee the activation of the others, and their interaction depends on the resources and constraints associated with each intervention. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that individual-level outcomes are

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strengthened when the relevant relational, practical, organisational, and motivational conditions converge around the needs of a particular participant profile.
This differentiated system reflects the Portuguese context examined in the Living Lab. Jobseekers faced uncertain transitions into or back into employment, frequently combined with limited practical experience, fragile confidence, and competing commitments. Employees participated from a comparatively more stable labor market position but faced challenges related to upskilling, technological change, and future professional adaptability. Effective training therefore depended not on the activation of a universal set of mechanisms, but on the alignment between intervention resources, contextual conditions, and the distinctive circumstances of jobseekers and employees.

1.5.2 Overarching findings quantitative and qualitative analyses

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings from the Portuguese Living Lab indicate how regional coalitions and training interventions can support participation, skill development, confidence, and occupational orientation among individuals in different labor-market circumstances. Rather than addressing a single homogeneous group of vulnerable young jobseekers, the interventions involved both jobseekers facing transitions into or back into employment and employees seeking to strengthen their competencies and professional adaptability.
Quantitative data describe the reach and progression of the interventions through indicators such as participation, attendance, course completion, and credential acquisition, where applicable. Qualitative evidence complements these indicators by showing how participants interpreted and responded to the resources provided and how particular contextual conditions facilitated or constrained engagement and learning. The findings provide stronger evidence of proximal individual outcomes, including confidence, perceived competence, continuity of participation, and occupational orientation, than of subsequent employment, career mobility, or organisational progression.

a) Integrating Quantitative Trends with Qualitative Depth

The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides a more differentiated understanding of the results of the Portuguese Living Lab. Quantitative indicators make it possible to assess the volume and continuity of participation across the different interventions. However, participation or completion alone does not demonstrate that participants experienced the same learning process or achieved equivalent individual outcomes.

- **Participation and Completion versus Experienced Outcomes:** Quantitative data record whether participants attended or completed training activities, including programmes focused on Python, MS Excel, 3D modelling and printing, entrepreneurship, and employability-related skills. The qualitative findings indicate that the meaning of participation and completion varied according to participants' profiles and experiences. Among employees, completing concrete and unfamiliar tasks could provide visible evidence of competence and strengthen professional confidence and perceived adaptability. Among jobseekers, continued participation was more closely connected to whether the training remained accessible, manageable, and relevant to their occupational interests and intended pathways.

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- **Shared Learning across Participant Profiles:** The qualitative analysis identified shared learning as the only complete CMO configuration supported across both jobseekers and employees. Structured peer interaction allowed participants to recognise that difficulties were shared and manageable, thereby strengthening self-efficacy, participation, and persistence. Consequently, similar quantitative records of attendance or completion may conceal important differences between socially supported learning environments and more isolated forms of participation.
- **Attendance Patterns and Organisational Conditions:** Where quantitative data indicate variation in attendance or continuity, the qualitative findings help explain how scheduling, access arrangements, platform reliability, communication, and trainer responsiveness could affect participation. This relationship was particularly evident among jobseekers combining training with educational, personal, family, or job-search commitments. Organisational friction did not merely constitute a delivery inconvenience; when it accumulated, it could weaken participants' sense of control and disrupt learning continuity.
- **Training Content and Profile-Specific Relevance:** Qualitative evidence also shows that the perceived relevance of training operated differently across profiles. For jobseekers, alignment with occupational interests and realistic career or further-training pathways helped sustain engagement and clarify professional direction. For employees, the value of training was more closely associated with opportunities to apply unfamiliar skills, experience tangible accomplishment, and prepare for possible future professional demands.

The quantitative and qualitative components should therefore be interpreted as complementary. Quantitative indicators describe patterns of participation and progression, while qualitative findings help explain how these patterns were produced, experienced, or constrained under different conditions.

b) Multi-Level Alignment: Coalition-Level Context to Individual Outcomes

The SYNCLUSIVE analytical model considers how national and regional labour-market conditions interact with coalition-level arrangements and individual-level experiences. The Portuguese findings indicate that these levels are connected, although their relationship is neither automatic nor strictly linear.

- **National and Regional Contexts (Macro Level):** Participants entered the interventions from heterogeneous labour-market positions. Jobseekers faced different combinations of unemployment, limited practical experience, unsuccessful transitions from education to employment, interrupted trajectories, restricted professional networks, or uncertainty about how existing qualifications could be converted into employment opportunities. Employees participated from a comparatively more stable position but faced demands associated with upskilling, technological change, and future professional adaptability. These circumstances were further shaped by regional differences in economic structure, employment opportunities, institutional resources, and skills needs.
- **Coalition and Intervention Arrangements (Meso Level):** The coordinating role of ISCTE, together with the involvement of public employment services, municipalities,

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educational institutions, employers, and other regional actors, provided an organisational basis for adapting interventions to different settings. Coalition arrangements supported the identification of regional priorities, the mobilisation of participants and partners, and the development of training activities connected to local institutional and economic contexts. At the same time, variations in coordination, communication, delivery formats, and available resources influenced the conditions under which participants experienced the interventions.

- **Profile-Specific Individual Configurations (Micro Level):** Coalition and intervention resources did not generate identical responses among all participants. Shared learning and the normalisation of difficulties supported confidence and participation among both jobseekers and employees (CMO 1). Among employees, practical activities and visible outputs could generate a sense of mastery and applied competence, strengthening professional confidence and perceived adaptability (CMO 2). Among jobseekers, predictable arrangements and accessible support helped sustain learning continuity (CMO 3), while alignment between training content and occupational aspirations increased perceived value, persistence, and clarity of professional direction (CMO 4).

The multi-level relationship can therefore be summarised as follows:
National and regional labour-market conditions shape participants' opportunities and constraints; coalition and intervention arrangements determine the resources and forms of support made available; and participant profiles and circumstances influence how these resources are interpreted and whether particular mechanisms are activated.
At the individual level, this produces two differentiated but potentially reinforcing pathways:

- Employees: Shared Learning (CMO 1) + Tangible Practice and Mastery (CMO 2) → stronger professional confidence, perceived adaptability, and willingness to apply new skills.
- Jobseekers: Shared Learning (CMO 1) + Reduced Organisational Friction (CMO 3) + Interest Alignment (CMO 4) → more active participation, greater learning continuity, sustained engagement, skill development, and clearer occupational orientation.

These pathways should not be interpreted as fixed sequences. Their activation depends on the alignment between contextual conditions, intervention resources, and the circumstances of each participant profile.

[Macro Context] Youth Precariety & Regional Skill Gaps (IEFP, Policy)
↓
[Meso Coalition] Neutral Leadership (ISCTE) & Sectoral Subdivisions
↓
[Micro Individual] Reduced Friction (CMO 3) + Tangible Mastery (CMO 2) ⟶ Increased Self-Efficacy & Mobility

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c) Core Characteristics of the Engine Approach

The combined findings highlight four characteristics of the Engine approach that can support participation, learning, professional confidence, and occupational orientation under appropriate contextual conditions.

- **Coalition Building and Cross-Sector Coordination:** Collaboration between academia, public employment services, municipalities, educational institutions, employers, and other local organisations provides access to different forms of knowledge, institutional capacity, and regional networks. This coordination can strengthen the legitimacy and contextual relevance of interventions, although its effectiveness depends on sustained communication, clearly defined responsibilities, and the continued engagement of participating organisations.

- **Multi-Level Intervention Resources:** The Engine approach combines coalition-level coordination with individual-level training and support. At the individual level, relevant resources include peer interaction, practical activities, trainer guidance, reliable communication, accessible delivery arrangements, and connections between training content and professional contexts. These resources should not be understood as a uniform intervention package producing identical effects. Their relevance varies according to whether participants are jobseekers or employees and according to their previous experience, confidence, commitments, and occupational goals.

- **Co-Design and Contextual Relevance:** The involvement of regional and sectoral actors can help connect training content with local economic activities and skills needs. Such alignment contributes to the conditions under which participants may perceive training as relevant. For jobseekers, this can support engagement and occupational clarification. For employees, it can strengthen the perceived applicability of new competencies to current or future professional contexts. Co-design therefore creates an enabling context, but its individual effects depend on how participants interpret and engage with the resulting activities.

- **Regional Context Sensitivity:** The interventions reflected differences between the regional coalitions, including technology-oriented environments in Lisboa and the National Digital Coalition and sectoral connections with agritech, commerce, aeronautics, entrepreneurship, tourism, or smart-city development in Évora and Lagoa. Regional adaptation increases the possibility that training will be recognised as meaningful and applicable. However, contextual sensitivity also requires attention to delivery conditions, digital access, scheduling, trainer availability, and the realistic opportunities associated with each regional labour market.

Together, these characteristics suggest that the Engine approach is most effective when coalition structures and training resources are sufficiently flexible to respond to both regional variation and participant heterogeneity. Its contribution lies not in a single standardised pathway, but in creating conditions under which different mechanisms can be activated for different groups.

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d) Maintenance, Sustainability, and Legacy Beyond SYNCLUSIVE

The longer-term sustainability of the Portuguese Living Lab will depend on the extent to which its coordination processes, partnerships, and training practices can be embedded in existing institutional and regional structures. The current findings demonstrate the implementation and perceived value of particular activities, but do not in themselves establish that these arrangements will continue after the SYNCLUSIVE funding cycle.

Table 12: Maintenance, Sustainability, and Legacy

Sustainability Dimension	Short-Term Maintenance (Project Lifecycle)	Long-Term Institutionalization (Post-SYNCLUSIVE)
Governance & Leadership	Coordinated actively by ISCTE with regular progress meetings and newsletters.	Transitioning oversight to permanent regional structures (e.g., PACT hub in Évora, Municipal networks in Lagoa, IEFP).
Employer Engagement	Project-based participation in specific upskilling sessions.	Standardizing co-designed mentorship and internship schemes within local employer associations.
Pedagogical Integration	Pilot implementation of short-term digital modules.	Embedding co-designed digital, micro-credential, and entrepreneurship curricula into secondary school and vocational system routines.

Sustaining the Portuguese Living Lab's legacy will therefore require stable institutional coordination, continued engagement from regional partners and employers, appropriate funding, and training formats capable of responding to different participant profiles. It will also require maintaining a distinction between immediate outcomes, such as participation, confidence, perceived competence, and occupational orientation, and longer-term labor-market effects that have not yet been established by the available evidence.

For jobseekers, future evaluation should examine whether increased confidence, continuity, and occupational orientation contribute to subsequent employment or further-training pathways. For employees, it should assess whether perceived competence and adaptability lead to the application of new skills, changes in professional responsibilities, or other forms of career development.

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