Partnerships for Skills
Learning from Digital Frontrunner countries
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Nesta runs two programmes in the Nordics and Benelux. These are **Digital Frontrunners**, an active network of over 300 future of work experts, policymakers and practitioners and **FutureFit**, a major training and research project involving unions, researchers and learning experts. The programmes are supported by Google and Google.org.

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Partnerships for skills: Learning from the Digital Frontrunner countries

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Executive summary

As digitalisation, artificial intelligence and automation spread across the world, labour markets are changing faster than ever before. In fact, the World Economic Forum reports that 54 per cent of all employees will require extensive upskilling or reskilling by 2022.¹ As a result, European countries are facing digital skills gaps. Employers are struggling to fill roles which require digital skills. Meanwhile, many people are finding their skills are out of date and they cannot access good quality, well-paid work or any work at all. This is holding back Europe’s economic growth and negatively impacting people’s wellbeing. Governments cannot solve this challenge alone. Effective skills development requires stakeholders from industry, trade unions, the education sector and national and regional governments to work together to build responsive and inclusive skills systems.

Whilst we were doing this research, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, affecting labour markets everywhere. Social distancing policies have increased the need for digital skills to deliver services, work and communicate remotely and connect with people who are socially isolated. This highlights just how critical it is that stakeholders from industry, the education sector, unions and government work together to ensure people can get the digital skills they need for life and work.

However, bringing together stakeholders in the skills system is not easy. The government, the education sector and industry have conflicting priorities when it comes to education and skills, as well as different ways of working. Stakeholders across all sectors often say they lack the resource required to drive partnerships forward and sustain them. In addition, partnerships have to navigate an unpredictable political climate. When political leaders or ministers change, skills development moves up and down the agenda making it hard for partnerships to plan ahead.

Nevertheless, stakeholders in the skills system can work together to tackle skills gaps and improve economic outcomes for citizens and industry. There are many examples of this being done effectively in the Nordic and Benelux region in particular. These countries are leading the way in Europe in their response to digitalisation and technological change and there is much others can learn from them. The region has a long history of cooperation and a collaborative culture, which makes it easy for partnerships to start, despite conflicting priorities.²
These governments are prioritising bringing together stakeholders for skills development through national strategies and initiatives. This has increased the resources available for partnerships and helped to align stakeholders working on skills development behind a shared vision. In addition, these countries all participate in international partnerships for digital skills, with an aim to learn from each other and share best practice.

We have identified some of the most effective partnerships for skills development in the Nordic and Benelux region and explored what makes them succeed. We’ve used Tuckman’s stages of group development – forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning\(^3\) – and applied it to cross-sector partnerships. Taking this framework, we’ve mapped the journey that partnerships for skills development go on and the key considerations for stakeholders each step of the way.

Tackling skills gaps is an ongoing challenge because labour markets are constantly in flux. Recent events have shown us how crucial it is that stakeholders from industry, the education sector, unions and government work together to ensure the workforce can adapt quickly. We hope this report provides guidance and inspiration to people across the public and private sectors who are working together to provide effective skills systems.
How to build effective partnerships for skills

Based on Tuckman’s stages of group development

Forming

Uncertainty can be high when partners first come together. The emphasis is on trying to understand roles, expectations and how partners fit into the bigger picture. Looking to the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition for inspiration, we recommend:
- Find someone who can drive relationships forward
- Set up a governance structure that encourages continuity
- Make a public commitment to addressing the issue
- Provide (inter)national leadership, whilst allowing for local adaptation
- Respond to urgent needs

Storming

Disagreements, competition and high emotions can emerge after forming a partnership. Working through these issues is essential. Looking to the Disruption Council for inspiration, we recommend:
- Establish an inclusive, informal environment
- Stay with the problem, don’t jump to solutions too quickly
- Unite partners behind a broad, shared vision
- Ensure discussions are informed by evidence
- Curate the group carefully

Norming

Working through conflict in the storming stage builds trust between stakeholders so they can start to work together. Looking to the Danish Technology Pact for inspiration, we recommend:
- Generate a shared awareness of the need
- Agree a common goal
- Use positive frames to describe the mission
- Set specific targets
- Provide direction, whilst giving stakeholders autonomy
- Use data to identify the best approach

Performing

Once the goals and approach are agreed, the partnership can start delivering a strategy. Looking to the Dutch Technology Pact for inspiration, we recommend:
- Ensure stakeholders share responsibility
- Reflect regularly
- Be adaptable
- Monitor, evaluate and iterate

Adjourning

Following the performing phase, taking stock is key. The focus becomes finalising interventions, capturing and sharing learnings and considering what’s next. We recommend:
- Identify what you want to scale up
- Make a plan to follow up
- Be prepared to iterate
- Consider sustainability from the get-go
About this report

Who is this report for?

Anyone interested in working collaboratively across sectors to address skills gaps in the labour market. In particular, it is for those who believe that progress towards this goal can be achieved by working with others: whether it’s with government, industry, education, charities or other actors.

How can this report help you?

This report provides recommendations on how to build effective partnerships. The strategies presented here are practical and tailored to the fact that readers might find themselves at different stages of collaboration. Each recommendation comes with an example of how it could be implemented in practice.

The report also provides you with useful further reading and links to resources that will help you build effective partnerships.
Introduction

The skills required to drive our economies are constantly changing in response to economic, demographic, political and social developments. One of the biggest trends affecting labour markets currently is the rise of new technologies. As digitalisation, automation and artificial intelligence spread across Europe, the jobs available and the skills that they require are changing. Studies report that 54 per cent of all employees will require extensive upskilling or reskilling by 2022. Some digital jobs are increasingly in demand, like data scientists, software developers and digital communications experts. Other jobs are changing. For example, the number of manufacturing jobs has decreased and a growing number of the remaining roles now require the ability to operate, monitor and maintain advanced industrial robots.

When we started our research, we were looking at the impact of technological change on skills. Then the COVID-19 pandemic happened. Social distancing policies across Europe have highlighted the need for digital products and skills to deliver services, work and communicate remotely and connect with people who are socially isolated. More than ever, we can see how critical it is that people have the digital skills* needed to participate in society and work.

As the world becomes increasingly digital, European countries are facing digital skills gaps. In 2017, 35 per cent of the EU’s active labour force (employed and unemployed) still lacked basic digital skills. There are two sides to this issue. On the one hand, employers are finding it hard to fill roles which require digital skills. During 2018, more than half the businesses who tried to recruit ICT specialists reported that they had problems filling the vacancies. This share has risen year on year since 2013. The skills gap is limiting Europe’s digitalisation and, in turn, its economic growth. Over 70 per cent of European firms report that a lack of skills is hampering their investment strategies.

On the other hand, many people are finding their skills are out of date and are struggling to access good quality, well-paid work – or any work at all. Across Europe, 43 per cent of employees report having recently experienced changes in the technologies they use at work, with one in five considering it likely that their skills will become outdated in the next five years. This results in rising unemployment and underemployment.

*Digital Skills

A wide range of soft and technical skills are needed in response to digitalisation. We understand digital skills according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition to include: technical and professional skills, including information and communications technology (ICT) specialist skills for workers who drive innovation and to support digital infrastructures and the functioning of the digital ecosystem; ICT generic skills for workers and citizens alike to be able to use digital technologies; and ICT complementary ‘soft’ skills, such as leadership, communication and teamwork skills, required for the expanding number of opportunities for ICT-enabled collaborative work. Employees also need a learning mindset, so that they can move easily between jobs, occupations and sectors.
Tackling the digital skills gap will improve economies as well as worker wellbeing. Our previous research identified four key challenges that governments need to tackle to ensure the labour market can adapt to current and future trends:

Four priorities for governments

**Anticipate the skills that will be in demand**

As technological changes sweep across sectors and workplaces, the demand for skills will change rapidly. To successfully upskill and reskill people to supply this demand, governments need to regularly identify the competencies that will be valuable in the labour market.

**Serve the diverse needs of workers across contexts**

To learn new skills, different people will have varying needs based on their contexts, educational backgrounds and work experience. Policymakers must understand what these are in order to design policies that give everyone the opportunity to learn relevant new skills.

**Build a resilient labour market system that can adapt to changes in skills demand**

Many parts of the education and labour system need to adjust in concert to create a more adaptable workforce. Governments must work across ministries and with a range of stakeholders to bring about systemic change that enables retraining and labour mobility.

**Discover and promote services that drive people’s intrinsic motivation to learn**

For upskilling and reskilling to be effective, people must commit to the time-consuming and often difficult process of learning. This requires strong intrinsic motivation, which is driven by factors that vary between individuals, and are difficult to define. Governments should therefore adopt an experimental, behaviour-led approach to identify services that increase this intrinsic motivation.

Source: Orlik et al, Designing inclusive skills policy for the digital age (2018)
In this report, we focus on how to ‘build a resilient labour market system that can adapt to changes in skills demand’. This requires all stakeholders involved – the education sector, unions, industry, government and civil society – to work together in cross-sector partnerships*. However, in many European countries, the stakeholders in the skills system* do not collaborate enough. As a result, increasing collaboration between these stakeholders is a priority at the national, European and international level. For example, the European Commission has developed initiatives like the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalitions, part of the New Skills Agenda.14

‘Policymakers, business leaders and other stakeholders need to work together to ensure that adult training and education systems optimize the availability and competence of the labour force while providing educational opportunities for the entire adult population. This requires multi-stakeholder collaboration and investment in developing robust and dynamic adult training and education systems.’15

Specifically, this report addresses the question, ‘How can the government, industry, the education sector and other key stakeholders work together to address digital skills gaps?’ To answer this, we draw on research and experience from our two programmes in the Nordic and Benelux region. Digital Frontrunners is a network of senior policymakers, experts and practitioners working to develop innovative approaches to tackling labour market challenges. FutureFit is a major training and research project. In partnership with some of Northern Europe’s largest trade unions, leading researchers, employers and adult learning experts, the project is focused on creating an effective adult learning system to help tackle inequality and social exclusion.

The Nordic and Benelux region is a world leader when it comes to digitalisation and skills. Working with these countries has revealed common priorities, challenges and successes that can inform the development of a more prosperous and inclusive digital economy. Over the past two years, we’ve engaged over 300 senior policymakers, researchers, unions and industry experts and have found that collaboration is one of their key strengths in solving labour market challenges. There is plenty of inspiration to be found in the way they use cross-sector partnerships to meet the needs of a fast-moving labour market.

*Cross-sector partnerships

We use the following definition of cross-sector partnerships: ‘relatively intensive, long-term interactions between organizations from at least two sectors (business, government, and/or civil society) aimed at addressing a social or environmental problem.’16

When it comes to addressing skills gaps, these partnerships typically involve stakeholders from two or more of the following: government (national and/or regional); businesses or industry representatives; the education sector (public and/or private); trade unions; and civil society.

Throughout the report we use cross-sector partnerships, multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaborations interchangeably.

*The skills system

According to the OECD, ‘a skills system can be broadly defined as covering all institutions and individuals, as well as policies, laws and regulations, concerned with the development and use of skills in the economy’.17

As well as the education sector, an effective skills system involves national and regional government, employers and industry bodies, trade unions and civil society, amongst others.
This work builds on Nesta’s extensive experience in delivering, researching and participating in multi-stakeholder partnerships. We advocate for Impact Partnerships – bringing together large companies, national government, innovators and citizens to tackle big social problems. More recently, we helped design and support the Inclusive Economy Partnership, bringing together businesses, civil society and government to solve social challenges, and are contributing to the Startup Europe Partnership 2.0, an initiative which aims to help startups scale across Europe. Several useful resources from our work are included later in this report.

To produce this report, we used qualitative research to gather insight and case studies from key stakeholders in the skills system in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands and Belgium (referred throughout as the Nordic and Benelux region). This included 25 in-depth interviews and three participatory workshops, delivered in partnership with Danish think tank DEA, the Flemish Ministry for Work and Social Economy and the Dutch Ministries for Economic and Social Affairs. Through our research, we have engaged senior representatives at the national and European level representing government, education, industry, civil society and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Throughout the report we reference specific examples of initiatives. In particular, we have highlighted four programmes as examples of best practice – the Disruption Council, the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, the Danish Technology Pact and the Dutch Technology Pact. We explore these initiatives in detailed case studies informed by interviews and secondary research.
Part 1: Navigating the challenges of building partnerships for skills
Addressing skills gaps is a complex challenge requiring systemic change. To create an adaptable and responsive skills system, many stakeholders need to work together.

At the very least it requires a tripartite approach, involving the education sector, industry and government. However, in practice there are many more players involved, including multiple government ministries, regional government, unions, both public and private education and civil society, on an ongoing basis. Partnerships are required at the national, sectoral and local level.

A collaborative approach to skills development is critical because:

- It helps address failures or limitations of individual actors or sectors 23
- It results in more innovation to address challenges 24
- It allows actors to influence beyond their usual ‘borders’ 25
- Collectively, the system can have a more positive influence 26

Building successful partnerships for skills development is not easy. The more complex an issue is, the more diverse and challenging the partnership needs to be.27 Our research highlights that whilst building partnerships for skills is complicated, stakeholders across the skills system can work together to improve economic outcomes for industry and citizens. There are many examples of effective collaborations for skills in the Nordic and Benelux region. In this section, we explore why it is hard to create partnerships for skills development and how the Nordic and Benelux countries have navigated these challenges to build strong, collaborative skills systems.
In many European countries, there is a lack of partnerships between stakeholders across the skills system, making it difficult to effectively identify and respond to skills gaps. Why is collaboration across the skills system not happening enough in many places?
1. Understanding the challenges

Conflicting priorities

‘There is still some resistance to academia and private sector collaboration. The two sectors don’t always agree on the purpose of education, especially related to the link between learning and employment. Their goals and values clash. This is the main reason why this cooperation doesn’t work.’

— Brikena Xhomaqi, Lifelong Learning Platform, Belgium

Our research found that partnerships between the education sector and industry are particularly difficult because these sectors have different priorities and values when it comes to the education system. Typically, businesses would like the education system to provide skilled employees for the labour market. However, educational institutions see their role more broadly as to help people learn, grow and reach their potential. Their funding is usually related to the number of students they teach, rather than specific outcomes linked to skills and employment. These differing objectives are often reflected in the ministries representing education and business. Governments can use national strategies for digital skills to help align policy across ministries.

‘We need to work with society, industry and education – but since the system in Sweden doesn’t encourage cooperation enough, the universities have little to gain if they work with industry. The universities gain from being good at research and education. So involving the Universities in the regional system is a huge challenge.’

— Nicklas Tarantino, Triple Steelix, Sweden
Different ways of working

The education sector, industry and government also have very different ways of working. Several stakeholders told us that industry is able to make changes more quickly than the education sector, where it can take some time to introduce new approaches. Educational institutions have to follow legal requirements and regulations and may only be able to adapt approaches for the following academic year. As a result, industry stakeholders can get frustrated when education partners can’t deliver the fast results they want.

There are some initiatives emerging that provide training more quickly and flexibly in response to labour market needs. One example is Make IT Work, a Dutch programme founded by the University of Applied Sciences. Make IT Work allows highly educated people without a background in ICT to retrain and enter a professional ICT role in just five months. However, such initiatives are currently the exception rather than the norm.

There are differences in the cultures of working between the government and the private sector too. In government, it’s common to spend more time discussing issues and managing relationships, whereas businesses prioritise fast, efficient decision making.

‘The commitment and contribution to the content design of curricula should be improved. Even when the processes for such co-creation are set and regulated there is lack of input from the employers and industry with a long-term vision. One must differentiate between retraining programmes that bring fast results and formal education targeting long-term impact. Education systems are mainly focussing on long-term learning-paths but employers expect fast results from training.’

— Kristi Kivilo, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, Estonia
Lack of resource

Our research revealed stakeholders in the skills system are often working with stretched resources and don’t always prioritise skills development. Educational institutions don’t always see addressing skills gaps as their priority and often have overstretched budgets. The majority of enterprises in Europe are SMEs and the Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium have a particularly high proportion of microbusinesses (with less than 10 employees). These smaller organisations typically have much less capacity to focus on skills than large firms. Our research found that companies will often say they need more skilled workers, but they are reluctant to invest in training for either their own workforce or new employees. Policymakers we spoke to noted that it’s sometimes hard to know if funding will still be available after the next political cycle. This can make it hard to plan for long-term skills programmes.

‘Companies often don’t have much time to work with schools and, when business is not going well, they don’t have the finances required either. So there is no continuity in the approach. However, if you want to work with the education sector you have to be very reliable because the education system will not adapt that quickly.’

— Beatrice Boots, Platform Talent voor Technologie, the Netherlands
1. **Understanding the challenges**

**Changing political and economic context**

The wider economic and political context can determine whether partnerships succeed or fail. In an economic downturn, industry is less likely to prioritise investment in skills because they are focused on ensuring short term profits. Although, during economic crises, governments often invest in skills development, as many countries did after the 2008 crash and as some governments are doing in response to the economic impact of COVID-19.

Politically, skills policy is not consistently a priority for governments in many countries. When leaders, governments and ministers change, skills policy often moves up or down the political agenda. Furthermore, policy for addressing skills gaps is usually competing for attention with other education policies. Often primary and secondary education receive more attention than adult education, but change is required in all levels of the education sector to meet skills needs effectively. Overall, the extent to which government and industry prioritise skills gaps varies significantly as the political and economic tides change.
2. Overcoming the challenges

There are many examples of effective partnerships for skills in the Nordic and Benelux region. So how do these countries navigate the challenges outlined above?
A culture of collaboration

Firstly, our research showed that the region has a strong culture of collaboration, which makes it easier to bring together partners with conflicting priorities. In our research and our own work, we have found that people tend to be trusting of new partners in these countries, making it easier to start new initiatives together. The Nordics, in particular, are seen as informal and non-hierarchical which makes it easy to invite anyone, however senior, to get involved in a project. The region has a well-established dialogue between unions and employers mediated by the government, a key part of the Nordic model. We have seen how this facilitates fast and effective collaboration between stakeholders in our FutureFit programmes in the Nordics.

‘A feature in the Nordic Model is a tripartite system, based on negotiation between the government, employers organisations and employees organisations. For example, wages are negotiated. This is how it differs from other European countries. It decreases conflict level. We are looking at how to maintain this model in the future of work.’

— Jens Oldgard, Senior Advisor, Nordic Council of Ministers
In addition, the countries in this region are small which makes it easier to find stakeholders. Belgium has the most challenges with collaboration because its three regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia) operate fairly autonomously and use different languages.

‘Sweden in the past, has been a strongly collaborative place. It’s often put forward that we are good at it. It’s part of the culture...Companies are not hierarchical. We come from a society where we are used to working together and we make it simple. Maybe that’s why universities historically found it easy to make connections outside. Many innovations came from this. It’s easy to work like that compared to other countries.’

— Maria Landgred, Vinnova, Sweden
2. Overcoming the challenges

Digital skills are a priority

Secondly, in the Nordic and Benelux region, tackling digital skills gaps is high on the agenda for the governments. As a result, there are more resources available for skills development within government and for industry and education partners. Each of the governments in the region has published a strategy for digitalisation which lists ‘digital skills’ as a core priority. This helps to align stakeholders within and outside of government behind a shared vision.

In addition, these governments prioritise cross-sector involvement in skills development, involving trade unions, employers, regional government, and representatives of educational institutions. For example, the Dutch, Flemish, Danish and Estonian governments lead a Technology Pact to bring together stakeholders across sectors to develop digital skills (see Part 2 for detailed case studies of the Danish and Dutch examples). In Finland, the National Agency of Education (EDUFI), under the Ministry of Education, is a national skills development agency and organises partnerships for skills. Although politics is never certain, stakeholders in this region can be more sure than in others that digital skills will remain a government priority.

‘The ‘vision’ of public-private partnership is shared across the system and collaboration is starting to work. We have a Dutch digital strategy, different ministries work together on it. Public bodies and industry are collaborating and supporting regional initiatives as well.’

— Rene Montenarie, ECP – Platform voor de InformatieSamenleving, the Netherlands
Willingness to collaborate internationally

The countries in the Nordic and Benelux region see the importance of working together and sharing learning internationally. There are several groups and bodies which bring together these governments. The Nordic Council of Ministers is the official body for formal intergovernmental cooperation among the Nordic countries. Its ambition is that “The Nordic region will become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world in 2030.” The D9+ group, formed by the Swedish Minister for EU Affairs and Trade, Ann Linde, has met twice, bringing together digital leaders from the Nordic, Baltic and Benelux regions to discuss digital policy for the region as a whole.

“It’s really easy to work at the Nordic level because we have very similar cultures and ways of doing things. I call almost anyone, no one is too senior. If industrial companies see that this collaboration is beneficial to them they are interested to work together, even a little bit and they are happy to share what skills they need.’

— Nani Pajunen, The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, Finland

There are also examples of learning and approaches being shared across the region. For example, as mentioned above, the Dutch government’s Technology Pact inspired the Danish, Flemish and Estonian governments to develop similar initiatives. Our Digital Frontrunners and FutureFit programmes are evidence of how willing stakeholders across the Nordic and Benelux region are to engage with and learn from each other.
Part 2:
How to build effective partnerships for skills
As we have seen in the previous chapter, countries in the Nordic and Benelux region are well placed to build effective partnerships across the skills system. In this chapter, we share our insights into what it takes to make partnerships within the skills system to work, using specific, practical case studies of initiatives in the Nordic and Benelux countries.

Our research showed that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to building a strong partnership for skills development. To organise and capture what we’ve learned, we needed a framework that allowed for both complexity and flexibility. This is why we’ve used an adapted version of Tuckman’s stages of group development. Tuckman’s stages illustrate how teams form and what happens when they begin to work together, what it takes for them to be effective, and when it’s time to call it a day. We chose to apply it to the issues that emerge from cross-sector partnerships for skills.34

How to build effective partnerships for skills

![Diagram showing stages of group development]

- **Forming**
- **Storming**
- **Performing**
- **Norming**
- **Adjourning**
The partnership journey is never linear.\textsuperscript{35}

Some partnerships focus on certain stages in Tuckman’s model more than others, some cycle rapidly through them in an iterative way and some jump between stages.\textsuperscript{36} That said, all partners go through structured stages characterised by the journey described in this report, in one way or another.

Each section below takes one stage of Tuckman’s model and explores what it means for partnerships within the skills system. We used four detailed case studies of initiatives which have effectively brought together different stakeholders in the skills system and exemplify Tuckman’s stages – the \textit{Danish Disruption Council}, the \textit{Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition}, the \textit{Danish Technology Pact} and the \textit{Dutch Technology Pact}. Through our Digital Frontrunners programme, we have followed these initiatives for multiple years, giving us valuable insight into their journey. We share our key recommendations for what partnerships within the skills system need to consider to thrive at each stage of their journey.
Forming

Uncertainty can be high when partners first come together. In this stage, the emphasis is on trying to understand roles, expectations, and how partners fit into the bigger picture. Initial interactions might be social and exploratory, culminating in a general agreement of why the partnership exists in the first place.

For partnerships to succeed, they need to get the conditions right from the start. This process begins in the forming stage of group development, where the emphasis is to bring the right people together and begin a dialogue. Throughout our research, it has become clear that this early stage of partnership formation deserves far more attention than it’s usually given.

Our research shows that there are factors that will affect partnership formation which are outside of the stakeholders’ control. For example, in places where there is a culture of openness and collaboration, it is easier to start partnerships. As we saw in the preceding chapter, the Nordic and Benelux region benefits from this cooperative culture. In addition, partnerships are much more likely to get off the ground when there is a sense of urgency around the problem they are addressing which is felt by all stakeholders.

‘Urgency needs to be felt by all stakeholders, otherwise nothing will happen. If you want to have effective partnerships for skills, you need both top-down steering and bottom-up incentives.’

— Pieter Moerman, Platform Talent voor Technologie, the Netherlands
At this stage, stakeholders forming the partnership should consider who should be involved and what unites them, asking:

— Why are we joining forces in the first place?
— Who are the stakeholders in the skills system that need to be involved?
— Are the people involved the ‘usual suspects’? Is anyone missing? Can we introduce any ‘wild cards’?37
— Are there any stakeholders we need to be involved who are currently unwilling to participate?
— Why are individual stakeholders interested in taking part? What incentivises them?

Devoting sufficient time to questions like these, and not opting for quick and convenient answers, is critical. For effective collaboration to happen, there needs to be a coalition of the willing, who are there for the right reasons and are motivated to push the project forward.

This section explores how to get these initial conditions right in the forming stage.
Case Study 1.

The Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition

In a nutshell:

The European Commission established the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition in 2016. It mobilises companies, non-profit organisations, educational providers, social partners and Member States in Europe who work together to tackle the lack of digital skills in Europe. The aim is to ensure that everyone acquires the digital skills they need to remain productive, employable and included. All organisations who take action to boost digital skills in Europe can become members of the Coalition and pledge to take actions to tackle the digital skills gap. Actions can range from training unemployed people, providing MOOCs for teachers, offering coding classes for children or cutting edge training for ICT specialists.

Impact:

- Members of the Coalition have provided more than 3.7 million online or face-to-face trainings, one million certificates and 9,000 job placements and internships
- Over 20 member states have launched National Coalitions
- The Coalition has over 400 members who have made more than 100 pledges
- The Coalition has helped all Member States develop digital skills strategies or an equivalent
Key recommendations

1. **Find someone who can drive relationships forward:**

   At the forming stage it is crucial to appoint someone who can spend time building relationships. The Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition has national champions across 23 countries in the European Union, and more are expected to launch in 2020. These champions facilitate the formation of coalitions between ICT-intensive companies, education and training providers, the public education system and employment ministries, public and private employment services, associations, non-profit organisations and social partners to address digital skills gaps.

   ‘We had a small amount of seed funding and since then it has been run on a voluntary basis. It’s possible to apply for more funding, through foundations for example. No one has been able to take this on. For now, we organise the meetings and people show up but we are trying to see if we can take this further.’

   — Fredrik Von Essen, IT&Telekomföretagen, Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, Sweden
2. **Set up a governance structure that encourages continuity:**

The Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition has a governing board which provides strategic leadership. Crucially, the members of the board do not have political ties, which ensures that elections do not disrupt the continuity of the coalition. Board members represent all the different actors in the skills system, providing a balanced range of input, knowledge, and expertise.

‘Originally, we had Digital Champions in each European state, mandated by each government. Most of them had a political mandate, so if there was a re-election the person in post would change, not helping with continuity of the actions.’

— Saskia Van Uffelen, GFI World, Digital Champion for Belgium, Belgium

3. **Make a public commitment to addressing skills gaps:**

The *Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition* invites any organisation committed to boosting digital skills in Europe to join the coalition. Prospective members are asked to endorse the Charter and the actions it includes. Organisations are encouraged to make a pledge for action, which will be displayed publicly on the Coalition’s pledge viewer site. Over 400 organisations have now made pledges towards the Coalition’s objectives. Members can contribute to the skills agenda nationally and at a European level. They also have access to an exchange platform where their work can be showcased. Seeing others in the same sector showcased at this level builds momentum and encourages others to participate too.
4. **Provide (inter)national leadership, whilst allowing for local adaptation:**

   The Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition has a Governing Board which provides strategic leadership to the Coalition. The Board has 12 members who represent the Coalition partners at European level and act as a link between pledgers, national Coalitions and social partners. This allows for action to happen locally, and also for key agendas, funding and ideas from other regions and countries to be disseminated amongst the network. As a result, ideas can be adapted and contextualised locally and stakeholders in the network across Europe can learn from these experiences.

5. **Respond to urgent needs:**

   People will only come together and collaborate when they are motivated by an urgent issue that directly affects their work. At the forming stage, stakeholders need to identify the problems that they all agree need to be addressed right now. The skills system can draw inspiration from the Green Deals. These are voluntary agreements between the Flemish government and other actors affected by issues relating to environmental challenges. The deals are initiated from the bottom up, by businesses rather than the government, based on critical environmental challenges which businesses identify within their sectors. For example, to reduce the amount of water used in brewing, a small brewery convinced other partners to get involved and collectively change their behaviour. This approach ensures all partners are motivated to address the issues quickly and effectively.
During the forming stage, it’s critical to assess the willingness of partners: do they care sufficiently about this issue to work together with others to solve it? It’s important to ensure stakeholders are motivated to address the problem, before jumping straight into the vision and objectives. Willingness to work together on the issue at hand is a good start, but true collaboration will only begin to happen when partners trust each other. Getting to that stage requires a lot of work. This is discussed in the next section, Storming.
Storming

Disagreements, contested boundaries, conflict, competition and high emotions can emerge after forming a partnership. Working through these issues is essential for the long-term health of any partnership.

It takes more than getting the right people together to get a partnership off the ground. Typically, when stakeholders come together, there will be a phase when disagreements might emerge, boundaries will be contested, competing priorities will be stressed, and emotions will run high as a result. Tuckman describes this as the storming stage, when stakeholders need to work through these disagreements to build strong mutual trust and ensure low levels of perceived conflict. This is easier said than done.

As we described in the previous chapter, the education sector and industry often have different priorities and objectives when it comes to skills development, and this can lead to conflict. When partnerships form between stakeholders in the skills system, the following issues can cause disagreement:

— Whose responsibility is it to ensure workers have the skills they need?
— What is the problem or issue? Therefore, what is the goal?
— How will it all be paid for?
— What are the legal and fiscal barriers that need to be overcome?
— What are the frustrations stakeholders experience when addressing skills gaps?
— Why do some stakeholders move quicker than others? How can we move forwards together?

Working through issues like these is crucial, because it lays the groundwork for the long-term health of the partnership. Without addressing areas of disagreement, it’s not possible for stakeholders to achieve a shared understanding of the problem and establish a sound basis for partnership.

This section looks at ways in which the storming phase can be effectively navigated, to lay the foundations for a thriving partnership.
Case Study 2.

The Danish Disruption Council

In a nutshell:

The Danish Government established the Disruption Council for the period of 2017-2019. Trade unions, employer organisations and companies, entrepreneurs, experts, youth and ministers came together for a series of eight meetings across the country. The aim: to prepare Danish civil society for the job market of the future.

The Council analysed and provided suggestions for how the future Danish labour market can address the opportunities that technological developments bring, as well as how Denmark can maintain and develop a dynamic labour market. Their recommendations relate to future skills, international partnerships, new business models, tomorrow’s technology and lifelong learning.

Impact:

- The Council reached a range of agreements regarding education and training in the future; productivity and responsible business; and issues concerning the labour market.
- As a result of the Council’s recommendations, the Ministry of Employment has made clear to unemployment insurance funds and municipal job centres that platform work is to be acknowledged as work. This removes the red tape blocking unemployed recipients of social benefits from using platform work as a stepping stone to enter the labour market.
- It paved the way for the first collective agreement with a platform company. The cleaning services platform Hilfr entered a collective agreement with the union 3F; securing employee rights including a minimum wage, pension and holiday allowance.
- The Danish government has entered into a tripartite agreement with social partners on vocational training and education. One of these is a ‘transition fund’ which offers free training to both skilled and low-skilled people.
Key recommendations

1. Establish an inclusive, informal environment:

The Danish Disruption Council’s meetings had an informal atmosphere, to prevent people from being intimidated by the seniority of participants. This ensured all representatives from different sectors were able to participate in discussions, which were of a conversational nature. Sharing moderation responsibilities also contributed to a more collaborative atmosphere.

‘Some people [in the Danish Disruption Council] weren’t used to being surrounded by others who are either really senior or have power. You need to create an environment where they are comfortable. You have to design a process where people feel comfortable sharing. They did this well.’

— Stina Vrang Elias, DEA, the Danish Disruption Council, Denmark
Key recommendations

2. **Stay with the problem, don’t jump to solutions too quickly:**

The Danish Disruption Council’s meetings were largely focused on developing a shared understanding of Denmark’s challenges in the face of digitalisation. This included tackling emerging types of work, like the platform economy, which clashed with the traditional Danish labour market model based on negotiation between government, unions and employer representatives. Debates and panel discussions were held with representatives working in the platform economy and employee organisations. The discussions allowed areas of shared understanding to be identified, and led to Denmark’s first agreement on how the platform economy could integrate into the existing model (see case study on page 33).

3. **Unite partners behind a broad, shared vision:**

The eight meetings The Danish Disruption Council held resulted in a range of agreed goals aimed at successfully navigating Denmark’s future. Creating this shared vision, rather than specific recommendations, ensured that the different actors in the labour market agreed to steer in the same general direction. Examples of some of the goals agreed upon are: developing curriculums that match employer needs; fair competition between SMEs and also digital platforms; supporting businesses to exploit data ethically; flexible educational offerings so that people can become lifelong learners; and maintaining the flexicurity model at the heart of the Danish labour market.47 48
Key recommendations

4. Ensure discussions are informed by evidence:

The Danish Disruption Council invited external experts to present key evidence relating to trends and issues in the labour market, e.g. management consultancies and labour market law bodies. These insights preceded discussions, so that debates could be evidence-based, rather than solely driven by personal interests or experience.

‘Design the group carefully. You need enough knowledge in the group to have fruitful discussions. This means people with ICT, labour, market law, and education backgrounds. We were too few members with a broad background in educational, research and innovation. Too often we ended up with discussions not based on evidence.’

— Stina Vrang Elias, DEA, the Danish Disruption Council, Denmark

5. Curate the group carefully:

Inviting external experts to speak is not enough to secure well-balanced discussions. The Danish Disruption Council consisted of experts from the education sector, ICT companies, labour-market law, unions, think tanks, industry confederations, business owners and many more. Knowledge from across the whole skills system is essential to secure a dialogue that is not politically motivated.
At the storming stage, it is too early to even begin considering intervention strategies. The priority has to be developing an honest, shared understanding of the skills landscape. A positive vision will help bring partners together. The idea is to move away from an approach which is risk-averse, but instead to seek ways to cooperate on solutions that can benefit all the stakeholders involved. Only then can they identify more specific goals that they can practically work towards. This happens in the norming stage.
Norming

Working through conflict in the storming stage builds trust and unity between stakeholders. Following this, partners can start to work together. This is time to set the direction, values and goals of the partnership.

This is the norming phase. As the partnership shifts from disagreement to cooperation, stakeholders can focus on a number of the key questions facing the partnership. In the context of skills policy, these may be questions like:

- What are the main drivers of the skills gap in our country/region?
- What is a realistic and impactful goal for this partnership?
- What role will each stakeholder play and who will lead?
- How should the partnership address the skills gap?
  Will it focus nationally or regionally? Will it focus on specific sectors?

It’s likely that stakeholders will shift between ‘storming’ and ‘norming’ as new questions arise. However, by the end of this phase, the stakeholders will ideally have a shared understanding of the problem they are trying to solve and a common goal they want to achieve. There should be an agreed approach to tackling the skills gap. The role of each stakeholder should be clear and they should begin to take on their responsibilities. All of this must be underpinned by a sense of trust and shared values.

This section looks at how stakeholders can set up their partnership for success in the norming phase.
In a nutshell:

The Danish Technology Pact (Teknologipagten) was formed in 2018. Led by the Ministry for Economic Affairs, the initiative is a partnership between the Danish government, the business community and educational institutions. The Technology Pact is a national collective effort to ensure that more people (particularly young people) are choosing to engage in technical and digital education programmes, to match the private sector’s demand for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) skills and competencies.

The Technology Pact is a direct response to the Danish government’s acknowledgement of a national shortage of employees with digital and technical competencies. More specifically, a 2017 survey found that, out of 33,000 job announcements from private Danish companies that year, 25 per cent were asking for STEM competencies.

Impact:

— 187 partners from companies, educational and research institutions, business organisations, private companies, NGOs and private foundations have joined the Pact.

— The Technology Pact has funded 48 projects and supported 108 projects to boost STEM teaching skills, increase awareness, and support their evaluation processes.

— More than 13 universities have received funding from the Technology Pact to increase interest in STEM. For example, Campus Bornholm Anne Knudsen received DKK 100,000.

— Last year four schools received DKK 861,000 for robotics education. 21 classes worked with the robots Makey Makey and Microbit to complete real-life tasks.

Case Study 3.

The Danish Technology Pact
Key recommendations

1. Generate a shared awareness of the need:

A key driving force behind The Technology Pact is the fact that all the stakeholders involved share an understanding of the need for its work and are behind its ambitions. In Denmark, The Technology Pact has been successful in part because the private sector and the government agree that skills gaps need to be addressed. Media attention has also helped raise awareness of the issue.

‘The key has been that companies themselves have seen the need [for the Technology Pact]; there’s been a lot of attention from the private sector. Everybody is aware of the skills needed in future. It has also received quite a lot of political attention.’

— Christian Vintergaard, The Technology Pact, Denmark

2. Agree a common goal:

For a partnership tackling skills gaps to be effective, goals need to be set by all stakeholders involved – whether it’s the education sector, industry, government, unions or civil society. The aims of The Technology Pact were set by representatives from business, government and education. In fact, the Disruption Council fed into the process too. When participants join, they sign ‘The Technology Pact Declaration’ stating that they, together with The Technology Pact’s other partners, will work to build the skills of the Danish population for a technological and digital future. This ensures all partners share the same goals, which is key to the success of the partnership.
3. Use positive frames to describe the mission:

During this stage, it’s important to shift from a negative to positive frame for the partnership’s work. Research shows that negative frames can make partnerships risk-averse and limit their success.54 The Danish Technology Pact says its aim is, ‘to provide initiatives aimed at strengthening the technical and digital skills of Danish people. It will meet a growing need in trade and industry, and will provide a basis for resolving significant social challenges in the future.’55 It’s about building a positive future rather than preventing a negative one. This helps build momentum around the partnership.

4. Set specific goals:

The goals of The Technology Pact are very clear. For example, it states that more than 150,000 children, adolescents and adults and 250 companies will be engaged by 2020, 20 per cent more Danes will have higher education degrees within STEM, and 20 per cent more will have obtained STEM vocational education within 10 years.56 Setting specific goals ensures that all partners are aligned and working on the same mission. It also means that progress can be tracked and measured.

5. Provide direction, whilst giving stakeholders autonomy:

There are many different initiatives in Denmark looking to tackle skills gaps. Part of the role of The Technology Pact is to get them to work in a cooperative and coordinated way. Since projects join The Technology Pact on a voluntary basis, it is not able to mandate what the projects work on and how they do it. Furthermore, there’s a balance to be struck. If The Technology Pact mandated what projects worked on, the system would be more efficient. However, Denmark would lose out on the creativity and energy that comes from grassroots activity. It’s about finding a middle way – The Technology Pact sets the direction for projects, but projects have the autonomy to decide how they work.57
6. Use data to identify the best approach:

There is a growing amount of skills data available to stakeholders looking to understand the skills gap better and to design effective solutions. However, The Danish Technology Pact recognises that one of the challenges stakeholders face at this stage is a lack of time and resource to analyse the data. As a result, The Technology Pact supports stakeholders by sharing knowledge and insights about the skills gaps. Part of its work is mapping out what projects are addressing skills gaps, and finding out what they need to provide targeted support. However, The Technology Pact notes that more evaluation and data on what works is needed too.

‘We take a data-driven approach, we get data on what projects are out there, which ones work. That way it is easier in the long run to advise... We have good data sets on who, how, where, but we don’t have the effects of the different programmes or different projects. We need to ensure effective evaluation takes place.’

— Christian Vintergaard, The Technology Pact, Denmark
During the norming stage, the priority is to agree on how the partnership will work and what it will aim to achieve. This needs to be underpinned by a sense of commitment, trust and collaboration. This alignment sets the partnership up to start delivering on its goals successfully in the next stage; without it, cracks will likely appear later down the line.
Performing

Once the goals and approach are agreed, the partnership can start developing and delivering a strategy. As the approach is refined over time, the partnership becomes well-organised, effective and starts to get results.

Now that the goals are clear, stakeholders can develop an intervention strategy with clear milestones to hit. This is the performing stage. Partners may want to get input from external parties to strengthen their approach and can leverage their influence and networks to get their intervention started.

As the partnership starts to deliver its strategy, it will be able to streamline and improve. Once it starts getting results, its confidence will grow. Disagreements will still arise, but stakeholders should have a process to resolve these as and when they occur. For this stage to be a success, roles and responsibilities must be clear and partners must remain committed.

This section looks at how a partnership can build on the foundations laid in previous stages, to deliver strong results during the performing phase.
Case Study 4.

The Dutch Technology Pact

In a nutshell:

The Dutch Technology Pact (Techniekpact) is a government initiative established in 2013 between 60 public and private stakeholders from business, trade unions, the education sector and the regions. Renewed in 2016, The Dutch Technology Pact 2020 focuses on training more technical talent and making employment in the tech sector more attractive. Its members have agreed on 22 national actions to create a sustainable workforce for the technology sector.

The goal of the Technology Pact is to produce 30,000 additional technology graduates a year to meet the growing demand for skilled technologists in the country. This is supplemented by ensuring that all of the 7,000 primary schools in the Netherlands will have science and technology on their curricula by 2020.

Impact:

- In the Netherlands, the absolute number of women taking up ICT undergraduate degrees has more than doubled in the past 10 years. At master’s degree level numbers have almost tripled.
- Between 2013 and 2018, the number of women in a technical profession increased by 24 per cent.
- The size of the technical workforce has also increased. The number of ICT professionals, in particular, has grown by 81,000 since 2013.
- Unemployment among technically educated people is low: 3.1 per cent compared to 4.8 per cent nationally for 2018.
Key recommendations

1. **Ensure stakeholders share responsibility:**

One of the strengths of The Dutch Technology Pact is its network structure. Although the government leads The Technology Pact, its stakeholders all share responsibility for tackling skills gaps. Furthermore, within the government, responsibility is shared between three ministries – Education, Economic Affairs and Social Affairs. Skills gaps can only be addressed effectively if government, industry, unions and the education sector work together, so shared ownership is key to ensuring that The Technology Pact delivers on its goals.

‘Personally I notice that when things fail, most of the time it’s when the ownership only rests with one party... So shared ownership is important. With all of the actions, we create a working team with people from different organisations to share ownership across partners.’

— Wytse Wouda, Ministry of Economic Affairs, The Technology Pact, the Netherlands
2. Reflect regularly:

The Dutch Technology Pact holds regular meetings throughout the year, where key stakeholders come together to discuss the critical challenges affecting the labour market and ensure the goals of The Technology Pact are still relevant. It is important that there are meetings to reflect on the project's ambitions, as well as the operational questions. It’s these meetings that help The Technology Pact to stay in tune in a rapidly changing labour market, and make sure its stakeholders continue to be aligned on its goals.

‘With the Tech Pact, we have four meetings a year. Two are at a working level with partners and two are between the heads [or directors or leaders or otherwise] of partner organizations. In the latter, we address bigger questions about the labour markets. We don’t specify concrete matters but we ensure everyone feels they are working on the same agenda.’

— Wytse Wouda, Ministry of Economic Affairs, The Technology Pact, the Netherlands
3. **Be adaptable:**

The performing stage often lasts a long time, especially when addressing complex and ongoing challenges like skills gaps. It’s likely that the needs of the labour market, and the environment the partnership operates in, will change. When ministers or even the governing party changes, The Technology Pact has become more or less of a priority or been understood differently. The Technology Pact has effectively adapted to an evolving political environment and a changing labour market. In 2015, it changed its approach from focusing on skills for the technology sector to technological skills for all sectors.

4. **Monitor, evaluate and iterate:**

The Dutch Technology Pact has a separate body which evaluates its progress, called the Landelijk Regiegroep Techniekpact (LRT). It produces an annual report which shares the results of the Technology Pact’s work so far. As a result, The Technology Pact can iterate to ensure it gets the best results. Now the Technology Pact has a wealth of information on approaches that are working and worth scaling up.
The performing stage is about delivering and getting results. It’s critical that all stakeholders stay committed and pull their weight. Open communication, reflection and celebration ensure that the partnership keeps the momentum up and stays on track.
Adjourning

Following the performing phase, taking stock is key. What has been accomplished? What hasn’t? The focus becomes finalising interventions, capturing key lessons learned, and sharing these. The fundamental question of ‘what’s next?’ also emerges.

Talking to the projects featured in this report, we noticed that their journey is rarely linear or simple. Working in collaboration in real life is complicated and, as a result, partners need to reflect on their journey often and adjust their course accordingly. This is how we understand the adjourning stage – it might not always result in the end of a partnership, it could be a new direction or approach.

At the adjourning stage, stakeholders address hinge-point questions such as:

— Have we accomplished what we set out to do?
— Should we continue collaborating? In the same way? Differently?
— Are we ready to scale up?
— If we are going to stop collaborating, what’s the exit strategy?
— What can others learn from our experience?

Several of the initiatives we heard from told us that they are in the adjourning stage more often than they would like. Funding cycles are often short, political support fluctuates, the economic situation changes, and, as a result, these partnerships are often re-evaluating and adapting their approach. Yet tackling skills gaps requires a consistent, long term approach. Therefore, understanding the adjourning phase is critical to being able to iterate and adapt to a changing environment.

‘Programme budgets are limited. How can we ensure continuity in this climate? [The STEM skills gap] is not an issue you change overnight with a nice project. It requires continuous cooperation between all the organisations in the Triple Helix.’

— Beatrice Boots, Dutch National STEM Platform (Platform Talent voor Technologie), the Netherlands
Part 2: How to build effective partnerships for skills

Key recommendations

1. **Identify what you want to scale up:**

   The Dutch Technology Pact (see case study on page 45) has resulted in a number of new pilots to tackle the skills gap in the Netherlands. Many of these are highly promising. They operate at a local or regional level and the ambition is to find ways to scale them up. This might mean lobbying for new resources, setting new measures or aims, and revisiting exactly how the pact is structured and operates.

2. **Make a plan to follow up:**

   The Danish Disruption Council (see case study on page 33) ran from 2017-2019, holding eight meetings across the country. The council defined 15 objectives across four themes to pave the way for Denmark’s future. Since these were co-created by key stakeholders across the skills system, the government recognises their value and has outlined how it plans to follow up on them.

3. **Be prepared to iterate:**

   Don’t leave it too late to evaluate progress and adapt the approach taken. For example, The Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition was originally set up with representatives who worked in government. Their political ties meant that the coalition’s leadership was sensitive to political changes, and was not able to secure the continuity required for it to flourish. This led to a change in governance structure described in the forming section, where board members were not in government.
Part 2: How to build effective partnerships for skills

Key recommendations

4. Consider sustainability from the get-go:

You need to have a plan for sustainability from the very start of the partnership. Often it’s hard to think long term because funding cycles are short. For example, ECP – Platform voor de InformatieSamenleving is a Dutch platform where government, science, business, education and social organizations collaborate on digitalisation. ECP ensures that when they set up partnerships, they think about a business model, future financing and building lasting partnerships right from the start.

‘It’s important from the start to make the collaboration strong. From the start, have a business model so that you think about future financing and how to sustain the collaboration. You need to think through how to organise it in a structural, future proof way. Schools, education and companies are struggling to make that work. Initially, they are often funded with government money, but to continue it beyond that is not so easy.’

— Rene Montenarie, ECP – Platform voor de InformatieSamenleving, the Netherlands
We understand the adjourning phase to be about reflecting, adapting and iterating, as well as ending, partnerships. As a result, the activities associated with the adjourning stage are critical to the success of any partnership. This means having a theory of change that can be adjusted and iterated upon, an approach to evaluation that recognises that the skills system is dynamic and complex and plenty of opportunities to act on lessons learned.
Conclusion

Looking to the future of work, partnerships across the skills system are only going to become more critical. As well as investing in skills for the increasing adoption of automation, artificial intelligence (AI) and digitalisation, governments need to develop skills for decarbonisation and adapt to changes in the labour market due to ageing populations and changing migration patterns.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected labour markets all over the world. Significant amounts of work and services have moved online, highlighting the urgent need for digital skills, and huge numbers of people will need to upskill and reskill as businesses make redundancies. The crisis highlights just how important it is that the government, industry, unions and the education sector work together to provide a skills system that can respond to labour market upheaval.

Skills mismatches are an increasingly urgent and complex challenge for governments all over the world. Our research showed that, as a result, many governments and education providers are shifting from a focus on reskilling to lifelong learning. This means people continue to develop new skills throughout their adult lives and careers, learning on the job, in their spare time, from peers, as well as in formal institutions. As governments begin to think of learning and skills as a lifelong endeavour, skills systems will become larger, more varied and more complex. Therefore, strong partnerships between all the stakeholders involved are more critical than ever.

Our research has highlighted that whilst building partnerships for skills is complex, it can be done to improve economic outcomes for millions of people and businesses. We have identified numerous initiatives which are bringing together industry, unions, governments and education providers to tackle digital skills gaps. There is a huge amount to be learned from the innovative and inspiring partnerships emerging across the Nordic and Benelux region, and many more elsewhere. We hope this report will inspire others to share ideas, approaches and best practice for stronger, future-ready skills systems.
# Useful resources

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<th><strong>DIY Toolkit</strong></th>
<th><strong>Collective Intelligence Design Playbook (beta)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Nesta Partnership Toolkit</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Practical tools to trigger and support social innovation. This includes a Building Partnerships Map that helps you break collaboration down into concrete steps, and anticipate challenges ahead.</td>
<td>Tools, tactics and methods to harness the power of people, data and technology to solve global challenges. It will introduce you to activities you can use to orchestrate diverse groups of people, data and technology to achieve your goals in new collaborative ways.</td>
<td>Practical steps to help you create a successful partnership, write an effective partnership agreement, and get your collaboration off to a good start. Particularly useful for the forming and storming stages.</td>
<td>A guide to impact partnerships: a specific type of multi-sector partnership, designed to create clear and meaningful impact towards a social or environmental goal. The partnerships set clear outcomes, have a transparent division of labour, they have a mechanism for taking stock, adapting and learning. Particularly useful for the norming and performing stages.</td>
<td>A toolkit that crosses local, central and international government action. It identifies actions the government can take when working across a system, from softer powers often shared with others, to more formal powers often associated with governments. Useful when considering the role of government in partnerships to address skills gaps.</td>
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Nesta runs two programmes in the Nordics and Benelux which focus on increasing collaboration between stakeholders in the skills system. The programmes are supported by Google and Google.org

**Digital Frontrunners** is an active network of over 300 future of work experts, senior policymakers and practitioners who want to respond to critical labour market challenges like digital transformation.

In partnership with government ministries, we deliver interactive workshops, research and experimentation for policymakers and practitioners that share our vision for a more inclusive digital economy. We disseminate best practice, facilitate collaboration between stakeholders and support innovative policy design.

**FutureFit** is a major training and research project, focused on creating an effective adult learning system to help tackle inequality and social exclusion.

In partnership with some of Europe’s largest unions, leading researchers, employers and adult learning experts, FutureFit is upskilling over 1,000 workers and conducting a large evaluation about what works, so that solutions can be scaled.
Appendix 1: Methodology

The findings in this report are based on our 2019-2020 Digital Frontrunners programme of research and interactive workshops, involving key stakeholders in the skills system from Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Workshops

Throughout the year, we have run three participatory workshops in partnership with leading experts in skills development. Alongside Danish think tank DEA, we ran a session in May 2019 to explore how to motivate people to learn digital skills. In September 2019, we delivered a workshop in collaboration with the Department of Work and Social Economy (Flanders) and FutureGov to investigate how to build effective partnerships for skills development. In November 2019, we partnered with the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs to run a workshop looking at how to scale up successful pilots and interventions for skills development.

Although all these workshops have fed into our research, we draw most heavily on the workshop with the Flemish government about effective partnerships so we have expanded on the content of this session here. At the workshop, senior stakeholders reflected on the partnerships they’d been involved in: what did the journeys look like? What made them a success? What made them fail? What role did the government play? The workshop was attended by 18 people, primarily policymakers from a range of ministries including Education, Work, Enterprise and Social Affairs. We also had several people from Public Employment Services. Participants came from across Northern Europe, specifically Belgium, the Netherlands, Estonia, Sweden and Denmark.

We shared Tuckman’s stages of group development with the group and asked them to explore whether these could be applied to the formation of partnerships in the skills system. Attendees mapped the enablers and blockers for each stage of the partnership journey. We also asked participants to explore the role of government in partnerships. To aid this discussion, we tested Policy Lab’s Government Intervention styles as a framework to define specific and concrete ways in which the government might play a role in partnerships at different stages of their development.

By the end of the workshop, attendees agreed that there is a need for a tailored framework to guide partnerships in the skills system through the many, complex challenges they face. Some took it upon themselves to adapt the framework for personal use in their workplace. This inspired us to pursue the topic through further research and to develop this report.
Appendix 1: Methodology

In-depth interviews

We conducted 25 telephone interviews from August 2019 to March 2020. These interviews were tailored to reflect the specific experience and expertise of each interviewee. However, broadly they covered the following topics:

— We asked stakeholders to reflect on the state of the skills system in their country or region: how collaborative is it? What needs to be done to improve the system?

— We discussed their experience of collaborating with partners across the skills system: what are the barriers to collaborating? What makes partnerships effective?

— We also did deep dives into partnership initiatives they had been involved in to develop case studies.

Our sample included a range of people from across the skills system.

— **Education and training organisations**: representing both private and public education, including innovative training programmes and an umbrella body for educational organisations

— **Government and policy**: Policymakers and experts at the national and European level

— **Industry**: Senior figures from the private sector including an industry body and private company

— **Public employment services**: At the city and regional level

— **Partnership initiatives**: Programmes which bring together industry, public sector and the education sector to address skills gaps. This includes organisations operating at the national and regional level

— **Think tanks and experts**: In skills policy and/or partnerships
Appendix 1: Methodology

The following list includes all the people who contributed to this research. We would like to thank them for their support.

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29. Share of micro, small and medium SMEs in EU-28 and member states 2018, Eurostat, National Statistical Offices, DIW Econ


34. Make IT Work, https://www.it-omscholing.nl/nl/

35. Nesta’s work in Startup Europe partnership 2.0: https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/startup-europe-partnership-20/

36. See Appendix, page 57, for a detailed methodology

37. Interview with Anna Nikowska and Dana-Carmen Bachmann, European Commission


42. Nesta’s work in Startup Europe partnership 2.0: https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/startup-europe-partnership-20/

43. See Appendix, page 57, for a detailed methodology

44. Interview with Anna Nikowska and Dana-Carmen Bachmann, European Commission


49. Nesta’s work in Startup Europe partnership 2.0: https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/startup-europe-partnership-20/

50. See Appendix, page 57, for a detailed methodology

51. Interview with Anna Nikowska and Dana-Carmen Bachmann, European Commission


References


36 There are parallels with the innovation journey, captured by Nesta’s innovation spiral: https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/helping-innovation-happen/

37 Stina Vrang Elias told us in her interview that an outsider perspective, sometimes a ‘wild-card’ helped give perspective in discussions in the Danish Disruption Council (see page 33 for case study)


40 Organisations become members of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition by endorsing the objectives outlined in the charter. Commitments are on the basis of best-effort rather than being legally binding.


42 Interview with Anna Nikowska and Dana-Carmen Bachmann, European Commission


47 Flexicurity is an integrated strategy for enhancing, at the same time, flexibility and security in the labour market. It attempts to reconcile employers’ need for a flexible workforce with workers’ need for security – confidence that they will not face long periods of unemployment (European Commission website definition, available on: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=102&langId=en)


57 The Nordic Model is reported to use a similar approach: ‘We contend that the central formula behind this success lies in what we call the Nordic model’s ambidexterity – the capacity to combine collaborative and competitive elements and skillfully navigate between them.’ Midttun, A., & Witoszek, N. (2019). The Competitive Advantage of Collaboration–Throwing New Light on The Nordic Model. New Political Economy, 1-17.


59 Interview with Wytse Wouda, Ministry of Economic Affairs


61 Interview with Saskia Van Uffelen, Digital Champion for Belgium