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**ДИСКУССИОННАЯ ТРИБУНА**

# LINKING THE QUALITY OF HUMAN CAPITAL AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SLOVAK LABOUR MARKET: BALANCE AND PROSPECTS OF ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICIES

# LEGĂTURA DINTRE CALITATEA CAPITALULUI UMAN ȘI STRUCTURA PIEȚEI MUNCII DIN SLOVACA: ECHILIBRU ȘI PERSPECTIVE ALE POLITICILOR ACTIVE PE PIAȚA MUNCII

# ВЗАИМОСВЯЗЬ КАЧЕСТВА ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКОГО КАПИТАЛА И СТРУКТУРЫ СЛОВАЦКОГО РЫНКА ТРУДА: БАЛАНС И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ АКТИВНОЙ ПОЛИТИКИ НА РЫНКЕ ТРУДА

KORAUŠ Antonín* / KORAUŠ Antonín / КОРАУШ Антонин
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2384-9106
LITTERA Luboš** / LITTERA Luboš / ЛИТТЕРА Любош
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3239-2270
KRAUSPE Patrik** / KRAUSPE Patrik * / КРАУСПЕ Патрик
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1070-6946
IHNATIŠIN Peter**** / IHNATIŠIN Peter / ИГНАТИШИН Петр
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4355-2576
JAVORČÍK Patrik***** / JAVORČÍK Patrik / ЯВОРЧИК Патрик.

* **KORAUŠ Antonín - Dr. h. C. prof.Ing. Anton Corău, Dr., LL.M., MBA**. Academia Forțelor de Poliție din Bratislava, Republica Slovacă (Bratislava, Republica Slovacă). / **KORAUŠ Antonín, Dr. h. c. prof. Ing. Antonín Korauš, PhD., LL.M., MBA** Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava, Slovak Republic). Bratislava, Slovakia (Bratislava, Slovak Republic). / **КОРАУШ Антонин. Профессор, доктор философии, магистр права, MBA.** Полицейская академия в Братиславе, Словацкая Республика (Братислава, Словацкая Республика). **E-mail:** antonin.koraus@akademiapz.sk ; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2384-9106

** **Mgr. LITTERA Luboš -** Institutul Economic al Academiei Slovace de științe (Bratislava, Republica Slovacă). / **Mgr. LITTERA Luboš -** The Economic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (Bratislava, Slovak Republic). / **ЛИТТЕРА Любош -** Экономический институт Словацкой академии наук (Братислава, Словацкая Республика). **E-mail:** littera.lubos@gmail.com ; https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3239-2270

*** **KRAUSPE Patrik -** Secretar de Stat, Ministerul de Interne al Republicii Slovace, Academia Forțelor de Poliție din Bratislava (Bratislava, Slovacia). / **KRAUSPE Patrik -** State Secretary, Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava, Bratislava, Slovakia. / **КРАУСПЕ Патрик -** Статс-секретарь Министерства внутренних дел Словацкой Республики, Полицейская академия в Братиславе (Братислава, Словакия). **E-mail:** patrik.krauspe@akademiapz.sk ; https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1070-6946

**** **Ing. IHNATIŠIN Peter -** Director al Departamentului de comunicare strategică (biroul ministrului de Interne), Academia forței de Poliție din Bratislava, (Bratislava, Slovacia). / **Ing. IHNATIŠIN Peter -** Director of the Strategic Communication Department (Office of the Minister of Interior), Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava, (Bratislava, Slovakia). / **Инж. ИГНАТИШИН Петр -** Директор департамента стратегических коммуникаций (Канцелярия министра внутренних дел) Академии полиции в Братиславе, (Братислава, Словакия). **E-mail:** peter.ihnatisin@akademiapz.sk ; https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4355-2576

***** **JAVORČÍK Patrik -** Facultatea de Management, Universitatea din Prešov, Slovacia. / **JAVORČÍK Patrik -** Faculty of Management, University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovakia. / **ЯВОРЧИК Патрик**. - Факультет менеджмента, Прешовский университет, Прешов, Словакия. **E-mail:** patrik.javorcik@gmail.com ; https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5465-1325

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5465-1325

ABSTRACT:
**LINKING THE QUALITY OF HUMAN CAPITAL AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SLOVAK LABOUR MARKET: BALANCE AND PROSPECTS OF ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICIES**

This paper examines the connection between the quality of human capital and the structure of the Slovak labor market, focusing on the effectiveness of Active Labor Market Policies (AOTPs). It highlights human capital as a dynamic set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that contribute to productivity and adaptability in the workplace. The paper discusses how the quality of human capital is shaped not just by formal education, but by practical learning and transferable skills across sectors.

Connecting the Quality of Human Capital and the Structure of the Labor Market in Slovakia, focusing on the Balance and of overqualification where formal education doesn't translate into higher-value work. The paper identifies four key AOTP mechanisms-skills development, mediation, labor demand incentives, and support for disadvantaged groups-as essential for aligning skills with market needs.

Three policy scenarios are proposed: Status Quo, Skills First, and Inclusive Growth, each addressing these challenges. The paper concludes with recommendations for combining demand-side tools with centrally organized programs, ensuring that training outcomes are directly linked to real-world job performance.

**Keywords:** Human Capital, Active Labor Market Policies (AOTPs), Skills Development, Labor Market Structure, Overqualification, Regional Disparities

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REZUMAT:
**LEGĂTURA DINTRE CALITATEA CAPITALULUI UMAN ȘI STRUCTURA PIEȚEI MUNCII DIN SLOVACA: ECHILIBRU ȘI PERSPECTIVE ALE POLITICILOR ACTIVE PE PIAȚA MUNCII**

Această lucrare examinează legătura dintre calitatea capitalului uman și structura pieței muncii slovace, concentrându-se pe eficacitatea politicilor Active ale pieței muncii (Aotp). Acesta evidențiază capitalul uman ca un set dinamic de cunoștințe, abilități și atitudini care contribuie la productivitate și adaptabilitate la locul de muncă. Lucrarea discută modul în care calitatea capitalului uman este modelată nu doar de educația formală, ci și de învățarea practică și de abilitățile transferabile între sectoare.

Conectarea calității capitalului uman și a structurii pieței muncii din Slovacia, concentrându-se pe echilibrul și supracalificarea în care educația formală nu se traduce în muncă cu valoare mai mare. Documentul identifică patru mecanisme cheie ale AOTP-dezvoltarea competențelor, medierea, stimulentele pentru Cererea de forță de muncă și sprijinul pentru grupurile dezavantajate-ca fiind esențiale pentru alinierea Competențelor la nevoile pieței.

Sunt propuse trei scenarii de politică: Status Quo, competențe în primul rând și creștere favorabilă incluziunii, fiecare abordând aceste provocări. Lucrarea se încheie cu recomandări pentru combinarea instrumentelor de cerere cu programe organizate la nivel central, asigurându-se că rezultatele formării sunt direct legate de performanța la locul de muncă din lumea reală.

**Cuvinte-Cheie:** Capital Uman, Politici Active Pe Piața Muncii( Aotp), Dezvoltarea Competențelor, Structura Pieței Muncii, Supracalificare, Disparități Regionale

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РЕЗЮМЕ:

**ВЗАИМОСВЯЗЬ КАЧЕСТВА ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКОГО КАПИТАЛА И СТРУКТУРЫ СЛОВАЦКОГО РЫНКА ТРУДА: БАЛАНС И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ АКТИВНОЙ ПОЛИТИКИ НА РЫНКЕ ТРУДА**

В данной статье рассматривается связь между качеством человеческого капитала и структурой словацкого рынка труда, особое внимание уделяется эффективности активной политики на рынке труда (AOTPS). В ней человеческий капитал рассматривается как динамичный набор знаний, навыков и установок, которые способствуют производительности и адаптации на рабочем месте. В документе обсуждается, как качество человеческого капитала определяется не только формальным образованием, но и практическим обучением и передачей навыков из одного сектора в другой.

Соединяя качество человеческого капитала и структуру рынка труда в Словакии, уделяя особое внимание балансу и избыточной квалификации, когда формальное образование не приводит к более выгодной работе. В документе определены четыре ключевых механизма AOTP - развитие навыков, посредничество, стимулирование спроса на рабочую силу и поддержка групп, находящихся в неблагоприятном положении, - которые необходимы для приведения навыков в соответствие с потребностями рынка.

Предлагаются три политических сценария: "Статус-кво", "Навыки в первую очередь" и "Инклюзивный рост", каждый из которых направлен на решение этих проблем. В заключение статьи даются рекомендации по сочетанию инструментов, ориентированных на потребности, с централизованно организованными программами, гарантирующими прямую связь результатов обучения с реальной работой.

**Ключевые слова:** Человеческий капитал, Активная политика на рынке труда (AOTPs), Развитие навыков, Структура рынка труда, Избыточная квалификация, Региональные различия

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## HUMAN CAPITAL: WHAT CONSTITUTES QUALITY

The starting point for our contribution is the understanding of human capital as a dynamic set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that individuals can apply at work to bring measurable benefits-higher productivity, lower error rates, faster adaptation to change, and more stable career trajectories (Cedefop, 2014). The quality of human capital is therefore not synonymous with the level of formal education attained but arises from the combination of formally certified qualifications with proven learning outcomes and the transferability of skills between workplaces (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). In other words, a "piece of paper" is only meaningful insofar as it corresponds to what a person can do in a specific work situation and how quickly they can integrate new knowledge into their performance (Autor & Dorn, 2013).

The Slovak labor market faces challenges such as demographic shifts, skill mismatches, and regional disparities. Sectors like industry, logistics, and healthcare require workers to possess more than just manual skills, leading to the issue a practical environment, the quality of human capital is reflected primarily in the time needed for training, in the stability of performance after reaching the standard, in the number and severity of errors, and in safety behavior in the workplace (OECD, 2019). Equally important is the degree of skill transfer: an employee with a high-quality "core" of competencies can, after a short period of training, move to a related role, cope with a change in equipment or work pace, and maintain the expected performance without long downtimes (OECD, 2015). Human capital understood in this way is also a predictor of wage premiums-not because the certificate itself guarantees a higher wage, but because high-quality and transferable skills reduce the employer's risk and increase confidence in the employee's performance (Herich, 2020).

The key concept is "practical learning": the ability to quickly absorb new procedures, handle work instructions and quality and safety standards, and translate them into everyday performance (Karšay, 2021). High-quality human capital is therefore more of a process than a state – it is created by a set of short, well-targeted training interventions that have clearly defined learning outcomes and are directly

linked to work tasks. It is this modularity and measurability that enable investments in skills to yield returns within weeks and months, rather than years.

## LABOR MARKET STRUCTURE: SECTORS, PROFESSIONS, REGIONS

Whether investment in skills pays off ultimately depends on the structure of the labor market. In Slovakia, it is significantly shaped by three interconnected levels: sectoral, qualification-professional, and regional (Cedefop, 2014). At the sectoral level, we are seeing an increase in the technological complexity of production operations, pressure to standardize processes, and systematic compliance with safety procedures. Industry, logistics, electrical engineering, and automotive no longer require only manual repetition of tasks; there is a growing demand for workers who understand the basics of quality, know how to work with measuring instruments, records, and simple diagnostics, and who are able to move in a disciplined manner in the rhythm of the production line or warehouse (OECD, 2015). A similar transformation is also taking place in services, particularly in healthcare and social care, where an emphasis on professional practices is combined with communication, ethical standards, and digital record-keeping (Herich, 2020).

The qualification-professional level shows polarization in jobs: alongside routine activities, there is a growing proportion of non-routine tasks in which the ability to solve problems, interpret data, and safely operate equipment is crucial (OECD, 2019). Deficits are concentrated in maintenance, machine setup, quality control, logistics, and caregiving professions, with the transition to these roles often hampered by a lack of practical training (Autor & Dorn, 2013). At the same time, there is a phenomenon of overqualification, with graduates with formal education entering lower positions without their theoretical knowledge being converted into higher added value. This is a sign that the curriculum and teaching methods are poorly aligned with real-life work situations.

The regional level adds another layer of inequality. Agglomerations concentrate job opportunities and training capacities and can update educational content more quickly in cooperation with employers (European Commission, 2020). Peripheral regions, on the other hand, often struggle with transport accessibility, a sparse network of providers, and limited space for practical training. The returns on investment in skills therefore vary greatly from region to region – a course of the same quality will have a different effect where there is a workplace nearby for verification and entry, and a different effect where there is a lack of training places and employers ready to take on graduates (Slov-lex, 2024). These differences mean that the design of adult education must be locally sensitive: the same modules work best when they are directly linked to specific job offers and workplaces in each region.

## AOTP INTERVENTION MECHANISMS

Active employment policies bridge the gap between the supply of skills and the demand for jobs (Cedefop, 2014). If they are to deliver real value, they must intervene throughout the chain – from the development of specific skills through accurate mediation to risk sharing at entry and the systematic bridging of barriers for disadvantaged groups (OECD, 2019). In practice, it has proven useful to consider four complementary mechanisms (Herich, 2020). The first is skills development, which should not consist of long, general courses, but rather short, clearly defined modules with measurable learning outcomes. Their quality is not demonstrated by their duration, but by the extent to which the participant can perform specific work tasks after completion (Cedefop, 2025). The second is mediation and counseling, which overlaps the mapping of the participant's competencies with the requirements of the workplace (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). At this stage, it is important to test skills on real tasks and work with barriers to entry – from lack of transport accessibility to low confidence in digital tasks (Autor & Dorn, 2013).

The third mechanism consists of incentives for labor demand, i.e., tools that reduce the risk for employers during recruitment and training periods. Wage subsidies, trial work allowances, and mobility support only make sense if they are linked to the quality of training and ongoing performance measurement after hiring; otherwise, there is a risk that the support will simply replace normal recruitment without any long-term effect. The fourth mechanism is bridging for the disadvantaged-integrated packages that combine training with mentoring and accompanying services to reduce the risk of early departure in the first weeks of work. This is a critical period when it is

decided whether the investment in skills will translate into stable employment or be lost in a series of short and unanchored attempts.

The effectiveness of these mechanisms does not depend on the number of resources spent, but on the quality of the links between them. Skills development is meaningful when it is linked to a specific job in a specific company; mediation is valuable when it "sees" into real workplaces and is not just administrative matching; demand incentives make sense when they are linked to measurable progress in performance and not to the start of employment itself; and bridging for disadvantaged people is effective when it takes responsibility for the outcome and continuously adjusts the intensity of support as needed. It is precisely this kind of interconnected AOTP that allows the quality of human capital to be revealed not only in the classroom, but especially in practice where the added value that ultimately matters is created.

**STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES OF THE SLOVAK LABOR MARKET**

Demographics: smaller workforce, greater pressure on productivity. Demographic developments in the coming decade will significantly change the ratio between the number of economically active people and the number of jobs (Karšay, 2021). Younger generations are entering working life in smaller numbers, while the large post-war charts are gradually retiring (OECD, 2019). In the short term, this shift may manifest itself as "soft" unemployment – the rate of registered job seekers appears favorable because the labor market is absorbing almost everyone who is willing to work (Herich, 2020). In the medium term, however, the same demographics increase the economy's sensitivity to the quality of skills: every new hire must reach performance standards faster, make fewer mistakes, handle a wider range of tasks, and work safely in a more technologically demanding environment (Cedefop, 2014). Where companies have relied on long training periods or "catching up" on shortcomings in practice, there will be increasing pressure to shorten the adaptation curve and to clearly measure learning outcomes directly in the workplace (Cedefop, 2025). Demographics therefore do not just mean a smaller workforce; they also mean the need to shift the focus from the quantity of interventions to their quality and effectiveness – otherwise, the economy will grind to a halt due to a lack of practical skills (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012).

Skills mismatch and overqualification: when theory does not meet practice, it can look like this (OECD, 2015). Despite favorable unemployment figures, there is a chronic shortage of workers in technical and operational professions, logistics, maintenance, quality control, and care and nursing services (Autor & Dorn, 2013). Many of these positions do not require long academic studies, but rather a precise combination of practical procedures, safety habits, and digital micro-skills-reading work instructions, working with measuring instruments, recording performance in the system, identifying discrepancies, and communicating with supervisors (European Commission, 2020). On the other hand, there is the phenomenon of overqualification: graduates with formal qualifications occupy lower positions in which they are unable to convert their knowledge into higher added value (Slov-lex, 2024). This discrepancy is not only an economic loss; for individuals, it means frustration and slow career progression; for companies, it means uncertainty and higher supervision costs; for the education system, it means a challenge to link content to real work tasks (Cedefop, 2014). The root of the problem is often the weak "visibility" of the workplace in the curriculum-if competency profiles are drawn up from a desk rather than "from the machine," the result is courses that teach "about work" rather than "for work" In practice, this can be seen in the difference between a participant who completes a module with a clearly defined practical test (set a parameter, use a gauge, fill out a record, report a non-conformity) and a participant who has completed a general course with no measurable output (Cedefop, 2025). The former can be use immediately, while the latter needs additional weeks or months to reach the performance standard – and this is where the "hidden" cost of systemic inconsistency arises (OECD, 2019).

The geography of the labor market in Slovakia is uneven. Agglomerations are places where there is a higher concentration of job opportunities, training capacities, and technologically demanding workplaces. Thanks to a denser network of employers and providers, there are also shorter feedback loops between the demand for and supply of skills: course content is adjusted more quickly, practical training is more readily available, and graduates find jobs with less delay. Peripheral regions, on the other hand, struggle with longer commuting times, a sparser network of providers, and a limited

number of workplaces suitable for practical training. Even if the course itself is of high quality, its effect will quickly fade without follow-up practice: participants will acquire initial skills but will not anchor them in a real environment and will lose confidence and momentum after a few weeks. This regional asymmetry does not just require "more" training outside the centers; it requires an intelligent combination of training with mobility (transport, accommodation for short internships), temporary training hubs, and a "training in the workplace" model in cooperation with employers who have suitable workstations and instructors. While in cities it is sufficient to optimize the content and flow of participants, in peripheral areas it is crucial to build the infrastructure for practical learning and ensure that training ends with a specific job offer – not just a certificate.

Almost every profession today leaves a digital footprint-from scanning materials to record performance to working with simple diagnostic tools. The skills that were once sufficient to manually operate a production line are no longer enough; basic work habits are now complemented by "micro-digital skills": operating terminals, reading simple reports, entering data without errors, and working according to screens and notifications. It is these micro-skills that often determine whether a worker can handle the transition to a new workstation or whether they will be left behind with every change. For AOTP, this means that digital elements cannot be taught in isolation in an "IT block" – they must be incorporated into each practical module as a natural part of the task. The same applies to quality and safety: measurement, recording of non-conformities, 5S, working with standards – all of these are as fundamental today as knowing how to hold a tool. Where these elements are missing, training quickly becomes detached from reality and participants encounter barriers when they first meet a modern workplace.

Participation in adult education is not just about motivation. In practice, it is determined by trivial but decisive factors: transportation and commuting, childcare, household schedules, health limitations, lack of confidence in one's own learning abilities, and fear of digital tools. Each of these obstacles can prevent course completion or turn a positive career trajectory into a series of interrupted attempts. If we want AOTPs to have a real impact, they must take these obstacles into account in advance: plan courses in blocks that respect the realities of adult life, combine training with mentoring and coaching, offer a "soft landing" during the first weeks on the job, and add mobility measures as needed. The costs of these accompanying services are minimal compared to the loss of a participant; the added value in maintaining and stabilizing performance is essential.

What does this mean for policy design? Structural challenges-demographics, skills mismatches, regional disparities, digital quality requirements, and barriers to participation-together painting a consistent picture: it is not the number of hours that matter, but the ability to translate learning into performance at work. This has four implications for the design of interventions. First, training must be modular and linked to specific tasks, not general "subjects." Second, its quality must be demonstrated through practical testing and subsequent performance in the workplace – only then does it make sense to subsidize its expansion. Third, content must be updated in line with technology and regional demand, otherwise the investment will quickly depreciate. And fourth, barriers to participation are not an "add-on" but part of the design: without mobility, mentoring, and a reasonable schedule, even a good course becomes a wasted opportunity. If these principles are put into practice, demographic pressure can paradoxically become an opportunity-not because we are compromising on quality, but precisely because it forces us to deliver quality faster, more accurately, and more measurably than before.

## ADULT EDUCATION INSTRUMENTS: TWO PARADIGMS AND THEIR INTERCONNECTION

When talking about adult education tools, let's start where their purpose is decided: with a specific participant and a specific workplace. Every adult who returns to learning brings with them a package of experiences, habits, and responsibilities. Every workplace has its own rhythm, standards, and tasks that must be completed on time and safely. If these two worlds do not meet, the result is a course that teaches but does not lead to work, or a job that waits but cannot accept a person because the final step in preparation is missing. Two complementary paradigms have therefore emerged in the Slovak AOTP system: demand-driven schemes, in which "money follows the participant," and centrally provided professional programs, where the emphasis is on standards, scope, and direct links to

employers. The tension between them is not a conflict, but a working hypothesis: if they can be linked, the participant retains autonomy and speed, while the labor market gains quality and predictability.

Demand-driven schemes, which include vouchers and, later, individual accounts, arose from a simple realization: adults know best when and in what format they can learn. In an environment where schedules are fragmented between shifts, family care, and often temporary jobs, the ability to choose a course, pace, and provider makes a real difference between participation and resignation. Practical experience shows that it is precisely the autonomy and co-responsibility of the participant that increases the completion rate. Those who choose the course themselves tend to be more persistent and better able to identify what they still need to learn. In many cases, these are not large, prestigious programs, but short, targeted modules that can be incorporated into life without dramatic changes: several weeks of practical training, evening or weekend meetings, blended forms with simple digital tasks. (Cedefop, 2025).

However, flexibility also has its limits. The course market is not inherently reasonable – without clear standards and feedback, attractive but low-efficiency programs that promise a lot and measure little will proliferate. Providers who are not required to demonstrate practical learning outcomes will shift their energy to marketing and formal certificates; participants who do not get the opportunity to try out their skills in the workplace after the course will lose momentum and confidence. Demand schemes must therefore be more than just the purchase of "course tickets." Their quality rests on three pillars: clear learning outcomes that are understandable to the employer; verification of these outcomes through practical testing and performance observation; and subsequent bridging to real work, whether in the form of an internship, trial work, or an agreed start date. Where this chain is not broken, demand-driven tools are seen in the best light: the participant arrives motivated, the provider teaches what will be done tomorrow, and the employer gets a person who only needs a short adaptation period. (OECD, 2015)

From the system's perspective, demand schemes are also important in that they "revitalize" the periphery. Thanks to vouchers or accounts, people from regions where there is not a large training market can afford to attend high-quality modules or combine online and practical training to overcome local limitations. If they also have access to mobility measures and mentoring for their first weeks at work, they will overcome barriers that would otherwise discourage them. Demand-driven tools are therefore not an elite solution for "academic types," but quite the opposite-if they are well designed, they can mobilize people who would never sign up for large, centrally organized programs.

Individual accounts take the demand logic one step further. Instead of a one-time "coupon" for a course, they create a permanent framework for regular adult participation in education. The account is not just a wallet, but also a mirror-it keeps track of completed modules, learning outcomes, and certificates that can be recognized for further advancement or career change. Ideally, the account is linked to career counseling, which is not an administrative obligation but a partnership discussion about what tasks a person wants to do and what they need to achieve this. The recognition of prior learning is also an added value: many adults have years of practical experience, but do not have a "piece of paper" that is visible to the system. If this experience is verified by an exam and transferred to a module, the path to the next step is shortened and resources are saved.

The strength of the accounts lies in the combination of autonomy and quality. Participants choose from a list of courses that have described learning outcomes and are approved according to minimum standards. Providers create the content but must prove that their graduates have succeeded in practice. Employers gain a partner who understands the language of work tasks, not just the names of subjects. And the state, which finances the account, finally has a compass: it can see what participants are learning, where it works, and where the content, methodology, or connection to the workplace needs to be improved. Individual modules can be organized into "micro-qualifications," which are no longer a random collection of certificates, but a logical path from an entry-level role to expanded competence or a supervisory position. If a performance contract mechanism is also incorporated into this framework, an agreement that public resources will be evaluated primarily on placement and retention, not the number of hours retrained-the expense ceases to be a cost and becomes an investment with a clear return.

Individual accounts also discipline the "exchange market." Providers who pride themselves on quality finally can differentiate themselves from cheap and noisy marketing. Those who know how to teach using machines, simulations, or in cooperation with companies will gain a reputation that will carry over into future enrollments. Conversely, those who offer generic, poorly measurable programs will find that participants and employers are not interested in them. An account set up in this way is a market for quality: money follows results, not promises.

The second paradigm, centrally secured programs, has a different starting point. It arises where the market needs to prepare large numbers of people for clearly defined professions in a short period of time and where quality is key not only for productivity but also for safety. Imagine manufacturing plants, logistics hubs, or healthcare facilities struggling with repeated start-ups, high turnover, and inconsistent standards. This is where a centrally organized program makes sense, as it can ensure the same quality of content, the same training methodology, and the same method of skills verification across regions. In cooperation with employers, work tasks are defined, modules and practical tests are derived from them, and training logistics are created – where to teach, who to teach, on what machines, and in what stages. The result is a "product" that can be deployed in various operations with minimal adjustments and that reduces the risk of errors and accidents when new employees join the company.

Such programs excel where they pay to invest in training infrastructure. Simulators, model workplaces, inter-company centers, and school workshops modernized in partnership with companies are guaranteed to be used and provide a return on investment in a centralized model. Project management is equally important: cohort scheduling, recruitment, support services, coordination with job starts. Centralized programs are measured not by paperwork, but by start-ups-if they come into production at the right time and with the right quality, they will relieve supervisors, reduce errors, and break the vicious cycle of turnover.

Of course, their strength can also be a weakness. If content is not updated at the pace of technology, it becomes rigid. If coordination does not penetrate the regions, the program remains a "head without legs." And if the most important link is lost-the agreement with employers about who and for what we are preparing-then even central provision turns into another school without jobs. Therefore, it proves effective for central programs not to be isolated but embedded into a living ecosystem: collaborating with schools and centers, utilizing workplace training, sharing trainers and instructors with industry experience, and regularly calibrating assessments with employers.

When we combine these two paradigms, a third-practically applicable-paradigm emerges. Through an individual account, the participant creates their own learning plan and selects the module they lack; if it concerns a profession where the market requires a standard, the module comes from a central program, and its verification carries the same weight in Bratislava as in Humenné. The provider is motivated to teach what the market values, because the results are visible and comparable. The employer receives exactly what was requested: not an anonymous certificate, but a person who master's a specific task, has demonstrated it in an assessment, and can deliver it at the operational pace. Public policy, in turn, stops counting training hours and begins counting careers-how many people were employed, how many stayed in position, how much their wages increased, and how much oversight and rework costs decreased.

In this combination, the false dilemma of "freedom" versus "standard" disappears. An adult does not lose autonomy when choosing a module from a list; rather, they gain confidence that their time and energy will not be wasted. And the state does not lose flexibility by insisting on practical assessment and monitoring outcomes; on the contrary, it gains data that allows for rapid course adjustments, redistribution of capacity across regions, and appropriate reward for quality. In such a system, the budget behaves intelligently: demand-side instruments cover diverse needs and individual pace, central programs maintain the backbone of quality in professions where errors are most costly, and both rely on the same principles of measurement and workplace collaboration.

## HOW DO SKILLS TURN INTO WORK?

The central question of any skills policy is the transformation of learning into performance. It is not enough to train "general" competencies; what matters is whether, at the precise moment and place, they are converted into a mastered work task. The mechanism of linking skills begins not in the classroom, but in the workplace: tasks, production line timing, safety procedures, qualitative tolerances, and the way the team resolves conflicts creates a real demand for skills. Only then does it make sense to assemble a curriculum, choose didactics, and design an assessment. If this order is reversed, "courses about work, not for work" are created-and the system sets itself up for disappointment for both applicants and employers. (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012).

Transitions and Reskilling: Shortened Bridges Between Professions The second component of the mechanism is managing transitions-between sectors, technologies, and career levels. A typical practical example shows an administrative worker who, after a reorganization, decides to reskill into manufacturing; a warehouse employee moving toward machine setup; or a caregiver aiming to transition into more specialized nursing care. All three cases share the need to identify what the individual already knows and what is missing, then construct a "shortened bridge" from modules that specifically fill the missing elements. Recognition of prior learning gives these bridges strength-if someone has already worked for years with record-keeping, occupational safety, and team communication, it would be wasteful to teach them these again. Instead, the focus is on the critical, new elements: measurement and tolerances, basics of setup, diagnostics, ESD standards, and recording into the specific system.

High-quality reskilling does not feel like going "back to the start" but is a targeted, time-efficient shift. Ideally, it follows the 70–20–10 learning rhythm: seventy percent of learning occurs on-the-job, twenty percent through coaching and feedback, and ten percent through structured training. This ratio is intentional-it reflects the fact that we learn most effectively in situations that carry risk, responsibility, and real pressure for quality. At the same time, a space is needed where a task can be broken down into steps calmly and understood why it is done in a particular way. Thanks to this approach, transitions are shortened: instead of a six-month "wandering" between roles, a person stabilizes in the new role within a few weeks, and the team does not lose momentum.

Managing "soft" elements of work in transitions. A change in profession often means a change in identity, an administrative worker becomes part of a team, a caregiver transitions into a role with specific responsibilities. Mentorship and working trials, therefore, are not cosmetic; they are a safeguard to ensure that the new team member does not face cultural barriers. When there is someone to answer trivial questions and legitimize the slow first days, the chance of a successful transition increases-not only on paper but also in the individual's mindset.

Inclusion in practice: bridging barriers as part of expertise. The third pillar of connection is overcoming barriers that may not seem directly related to expertise but, in practice, determine success. Transportation, childcare, health limitations, fear of digital tools, or low self-confidence after prolonged unemployment-these are all small stones that even a well-designed course can trip over. Field experience clearly shows: if these barriers are not identified and removed in advance, they increase early departures, delay onboarding, and reduce retention after the first weeks at work. Therefore, module design must include "soft infrastructure": reasonable schedules for adults, the possibility of blended learning formats for theory, short training windows aligned with schedule changes, a mobility contact point, and clearly agreed-upon steps for the first days on the job.

Inclusion also extends beyond disadvantaged groups. In modern workplaces, working in multicultural teams, with people of various age charts and educational backgrounds, is the norm. Training that accounts for this build's communication protocols, clear escalation procedures, shared "minimums" of digital literacy, and rituals for quality and safety, which ease cooperation. Thus, the quality of human capital also gains an organizational dimension: it's not just about what the individual knows, but how their skills "fit" into the team and process without unnecessary friction.

The fourth, concluding element of the mechanism is measurement and calibration. Without these, even well-designed modules will gradually detach from reality. After each cohort and every new hire, a quick check should follow how long did it took for the newcomer to meet the standard, how many discrepancies were related to their work, how many interventions were required from the mentor, how quickly they adapted to digital record-keeping, and which steps caused them

the most difficulty. These data are not meant to find the culprit but to improve the content: if a recurring issue arises with measurements, practical exercises will be intensified, and the assessment will be adjusted; if digital record-keeping stalls, short drills will be integrated into each module; if onboarding time at a specific workplace is prolonged, the training will be adjusted to match its pace.

Calibration also has an external dimension. When the same module is implemented in different regions, it's crucial to maintain the same standard. Shared assessments, instructor rotations, result comparisons, and peer reviews among providers prevent the "dilution" of quality and simultaneously create a community of practice that exchanges small improvements. This interconnected system prevents skills from stagnating in a certificate-it keeps them alive in the rhythm of the workplaces.

The mechanism for linking skills and work can be summarized as a cycle. It starts in the workplace, continues in the course, and returns to practice with feedback. At the core of the cycle are three simple principles: first the task, then the module; first the proof, then the certificate; first the retention, then the celebration. When programs are designed and active labor market policies are set according to these principles, courses stop being a "promise of the future" and become an investment with immediate effects-effects visible on the production line, in the warehouse, in departments, and on the pays lip.

**EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS ON EFFECTIVENESS AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS**

The chapter on effectiveness and value for money must begin with a sober acknowledgment: no instrument is a panacea, and outcomes vary across professions, regions, and providers. Nevertheless, several solid patterns can be identified that occur so often in practice they become a reliable decision-making map. The first pattern is the relatively high completion rate in demand-side schemes-adults who choose a course and organize their life around it usually completes it. The second is a solid but heterogeneous short-term placement: about half of the graduates find a job within six months, with better outcomes for modules closely linked to employers and specific tasks. The third pattern is the higher predictability of centrally organized programs in professions where safety, quality, and technological routines are critical-where errors are prevented from the first day, even at the cost of more precise and prolonged training.

If we look more closely at what drives the completion rate, we discover the role of autonomy in demand-side schemes. A participant who chooses the module, format, and pace enters the course with clear interest. However, completion is not just a matter of motivation; equally important is the technical "mirror" of the course: learning outcomes must be framed as work tasks, and the assessment must simulate reality. In courses where what is tested is what will be done on Monday on the shift, dropouts are fewer, and the progress is smoother. Where the final exam tests only verbal knowledge, the number of "paper successes" grows, which quickly fade after placement in long retraining periods.

Short-term placement within six months is sensitive to two factors: timing and contact with practice. Timing means that the module must end when job openings are genuinely available. Contact with practice means that the participant had the opportunity during the course, even briefly, to work in rhythm and under safety supervision. If these conditions are met, the transition from class to the workplace is quick, and the "energy" of the course is not lost. If the course ends during a recruitment slump or without being linked to a specific workplace, the graduate returns home with a fresh skill they have nowhere to solidify. After a few weeks without practice, the skill weakens, self-confidence drops, and statistics shift to lower placements.

Centrally organized programs come into play precisely where timing and quality are critical. When cohorts, exam dates, production ramp-ups, and mentors are agreed upon in advance, the onboarding curve is smoother and more predictable. This does not mean that centrally organized programs are better "in general"-it means that in professions with higher technological and safety demands, they provide a more stable bridge between the course and the first shift. Their added value is also shown in "corner" metrics: not just in the initial placement, but in reduced error rates during the first weeks, shorter time to reach standards, and fewer supervisor interventions. All these are items that reflect on the sensitive operational costs-waste, complaints, and the time the team spend "catching up" instead of planned production. (Autor & Dorn, 2013)

Looking at cost-effectiveness brings another important distinction: the difference between the nominal price of the course and the total economic costs for the system. Demand-side schemes tend

to have lower nominal costs per participant and minimal overhead on the side of the public support provider. However, if the content is generic, lacks practice, and lacks follow-up job-matching, hidden costs quickly shift to the employer-longer onboarding, higher error rates, and turnover. Centrally organized programs are nominally more expensive and administratively more demanding, but in professions where quality and safety are paramount, they save where the company hurts the most. The crucial factor is not the total sum, but where the savings occur: if we save on the course budget but lose in the first three months of production, the system loses.

In terms of heterogeneity of outcomes, the greatest differences occur between professions, not instruments. Short administrative and service modules achieve faster placement, but their wage premiums are modest, and retention is more sensitive to workplace quality. Technical and operational modules that involve real practice on machines and diagnostics require more preparation, but they bring higher stability and wage dynamics. In healthcare and caregiving, quality is critically dependent on practice and supervision; without them, the course is hard to turn into safe, ethically grounded performance. So, when asking “which tool is more effective,” the more accurate question is: “for which professions and under what conditions?”

When we shift our attention from placement to retention, another regularity emerges. The first three months on the job are fragile for everyone, not just disadvantaged groups. This period is when habits break, quality rituals are established, and the safety culture is anchored. Programs that provide a "soft landing"-short mentoring, accessible coaching, the opportunity to consult minor questions-have an edge in retention statistics. These are not large expenditures; they are concentrated resources at the right time. Both sides benefit from retention: the worker gains tempo and certainty, the employer gains team stability and training return. From a public policy perspective, this is the cheapest insurance against investment loss-every premature departure sets the whole chain back a step.

When considering value for money, we often ask about “deadweight” and “substitution” – whether the transition into work would have occurred even without support, or whether the subsidy displaced another candidate. Strict targeting discipline helps here: if the instrument is directed towards professions and regions with proven shortages, and if the support is linked to training quality and post-placement outcomes, the risk of deadweight is reduced. This applies equally to demand-side and centrally organized programs. It is crucial to differentiate between "course as a service" and "course as an investment": the former increases activity and possibly motivation, while the latter demonstrably changes career trajectories and performance numbers on the production line or in departments. Public support makes sense when it buys the latter.

Special attention should be given to the issue of measurement. Tracking only the number of participants and completion is tempting for simplicity, but it is misleading. Without indicators of placement, retention, and wage dynamics, we remain at "outputs" rather than "outcomes." Practice shows that it is meaningful to read these metrics in relation to the profession, module type, and provider quality. This creates the "thermometer" of the system, which reveals not only where things are going well but, more importantly, where the content, didactics, or connections to workplaces need to be changed. This type of measure also protects fair competition: a provider investing in quality will finally stand out from those focusing on low prices and "paper" results.

Finally, empirical observations confirm that the highest returns come from programs that combine three elements: modular content derived from the work task, practical validation in a setting close to real operations, and an agreed transition into work. In such a setup, even demand-side schemes deliver predictable outcomes, and centrally organized programs do not lose flexibility. The costs of a unified course registry, minimum standards, external evaluation, and brief mentoring are returned everywhere they have been implemented-not in abstract indicators but in the specific hours of supervisors that can be devoted to improving the process instead of firefighting the initial challenges of newcomers.

If we were to summarize this chapter in one sentence, it would be: Effectiveness and cost-effectiveness are not inherent qualities of the tool but qualities of its connection to the workplace and its honest measurement. Where the three basic rules are applied-first the task, then the course; first the proof, then the certificate; first retention, then billboards, the investment in skills transforms into

added value, visible on the production line, in the warehouse, in the clinic, and on the pays lip. And that is precisely the transformation we are aiming for.

## SCENARIOS FOR SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT POLICIES

The second half of the text opens with a forward-looking view. Scenarios are not prophecies but working maps: they summarize crucial shifts that could occur if we choose a specific combination of tools and priorities today. In our case, there are three paths. The first, conservative scenario, maintains the current setup and relies on the labor market "somehow" absorbing the differences in skill quality and availability. The second shifts the focus to skills as the core of policy-not in declarations, but in the everyday management of content, quality, and outcomes. The third broadens the scope to inclusion and aims to turn "hard cases" into success stories, thereby expanding the number of people who can retain and grow in their jobs. Each scenario has its own logic, management demands, and risk profile.

The "Status Quo" scenario appears attractive at first glance, as it does not require large systemic changes. Demand-side schemes continue at their current pace, centrally organized programs are implemented ad hoc where the pressure is greatest, and indicators are primarily read at the input stage-number of participants, hours of training, completion rates. In times of favorable demographics and low unemployment, this regime even creates the illusion of efficiency: courses fill up, certificates are issued, people move through the labor market. However, upon closer inspection, old weaknesses surface. The disparity in quality between providers remains large, and without a unified registry and minimum standards, distinguishing good from average is difficult. Links to workplaces are uneven: in urban centers, transitions and reskilling in practice take less time, while in peripheral areas, newly acquired competencies quickly "evaporate." The biggest risk comes with technology: content that does not evolve with operational rhythms becomes outdated and turns into a well-meaning but costly ornament. In this scenario, regional disparities will grow faster, and a stark difference will emerge between professions where quality is measured and those where "paper" is enough. If we imagine 2035 continuing with today's habits, we will see a labor market functioning "on average“many people will be retrained, but the retention rate after three to six months will improve only slowly, wage premiums will be modest, and companies will incur high supervision and adaptation costs. This is not a crisis, but it is clearly a wasted opportunity.

The "Skills First" scenario reverses the order of steps and, with it, the focus of measurement. Policy begins not with budget chapters and course categories but with work tasks and competency maps, from which modular content and methods of verification are derived. Demand-side instruments, whether vouchers or individual accounts-remain the backbone of adult participation, but the course list is filtered through uniform criteria and outcome agreements. Providers who demonstrate quality in practice are given more space and predictable support, while those who rely on marketing and formal certificates naturally shift to the periphery. Centrally organized programs are planned and in partnership with employers in professions where errors hurt the most - safety, quality, or reputation. Their content is recalibrated annually based on operational data, exams are shared across regions, and instructors rotate to maintain a common standard. Meanwhile, "soft infrastructure" is strengthened: mentoring in the first weeks of work, short internships during the course, accessible mobility support, and reasonable schedules for adults. The result is not an immediate miracle, but a steady shift across all meaningful metrics: time to reach the standard decreases, error rates during ramp-up decline, retention after six- and twelve-months increases, and in higher-value professions, noticeable wage premiums start to appear. The budget does not need to grow dramatically; it rather shifts from passive items and blanket subsidies into quality modules, provider assessments, and brief post-placement coaching. The biggest challenge in this scenario is discipline: without regular measurement, without publishing results, and without the willingness to move capacity between regions, its benefits will dissipate. But if discipline is maintained, 2035 will be seen as the moment when "courses" became real bridges-shorter, sturdier, and leading directly to where the work is.

The "Inclusive Growth" scenario builds on the second but broadens it to ensure that skills policy does not just concern "maybe-it-will-work" cases but also those facing multiple barriers. Its ambition is both simple and radical: to transform groups that today are filtered out by the long-term

unemployed, young people without work history, people over fifty with worn-out professions, and parents returning after a long break-into regular recipients of quality training, mentoring, and supported employment. In practice, this means that the course is not offered as an isolated service, but as part of a package that includes barrier diagnostics, short trial days, agreed-upon adjustments for childcare or transport, and especially coaching that the individual can rely on during the first weeks on the job. Employers enter into partnerships not for the subsidy, but to reduce risk: they know that the newcomer is supported by a team that will not let them "fall" during the first disagreement. In the regional dimension, this scenario creates vibrant bridges between schools, training centers, and companies: "micro-clusters" form where modular content is quickly adjusted to needs, and providers share trainers, workplaces, and testing protocols. From a macro perspective, it changes not only employment statistics but also the structure of the labor force. The segment of people previously considered "unemployable" returns to the core of production and services, thereby expanding the workforce during demographic decline. It is not free of charge-accompanying services and mentoring cost something-but the return on investment is reflected in retention and team stability, which businesses can precisely quantify.

These three scenarios are not impermeable boundaries; they represent three points on a triangle, between which reality will move. What is crucial is the contractual and data habits we build in the meantime. In the "status quo" mode, many things can be improved without a legislative revolution-it is enough to start reading indicators around the corner and make them public so that quality rises to the surface. In the "skills first" mode, it is essential to learn to adjust courses faster than before: instead of multi-year cycles, annual recalibrations will suffice if based on evidence from practice. And in the "inclusive growth" mode, it is important not to turn integration into a bureaucratic tower-simple but reliable links work best, where each partner has a clear role, contact, and responsibility.

The three scenarios all require a decision on where the focus should lie. If we choose the first, we will pay “the old way” and leave the rest to regional improvisation; results will depend on local leaders and whether the right people meet at the right time in the region. If we choose the second, we will need to shift part of the budget towards content quality, provider assessments, and results-based contracts; the administration will temporarily become more complex, but the budget will start to behave like an investment. If we choose the third, we will also add accompanying services and mentoring to all the above; the cost per participant will increase, but the cost of early departures and turnover will decrease. In any case, it is worth setting up a “safety brake” in the form of pilots: before rolling out the new model across the entire country, we will test it in two or three different regions and adjust it based on data, not impressions.

If we had to choose a single image to describe the difference between the three paths, it would be the way skills are approached. In the “status quo,” we buy hours and hope they will turn into performance. In the “skills-first” approach, we buy evidence-practical learning outcomes and post-placement stability-and see hours to an end. In the “inclusive growth” model, we make this logic a public rule for everyone, including those who face objectively greater challenges. The year 2035 will look the way the rules we start applying today do: whether we will measure what matters in skills policy and whether we will have the courage to move resources to those who can deliver the difference between a course and a job. If we do, the “scenario” will stop being a hypothesis and will become a description of reality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BALANCING THE PORTFOLIO OF ACTIVE LABOR MARKET POLICIES

If skills policy is to bring measurable improvements in employability, wage premiums, and team stability, it must follow a simple rule: invest in what can be practically proven. In the Slovak context, this means bringing demand-side tools closer to centrally organized programs, so they complement each other's weaknesses and share the same quality principles. The first step is to adopt a combined financing model, where individual accounts and vouchers remain the gateway for adults to learn, but their use is tied to courses with clearly defined learning outcomes and proven transitions into practice. Simultaneously, centrally organized programs will be planned for professionals with high demands on safety, quality, and technological discipline, ensuring a unified standard for content and exams

across regions, agreed upon from the start with employers. This dual track is not duplication; it is a sensible distribution of risk between participant autonomy and quality assurance in sensitive sectors.

The second pillar is result-based agreements. Public support makes sense if it buys outcomes, not just activity. Instead of counting training hours, contracts should be made with providers and their corporate partners, setting predefined success thresholds-placement within three, six, and twelve months, retention after six months and one year, and where applicable, wage dynamics. Contracts should account for risk-sharing: if a provider delivers above-average results in challenging professions or regions, they receive a bonus; if they consistently fall below the agreed threshold, a corrective plan or natural exit from the publicly supported list follows. This system motivates honest module design, stronger links to workplaces, and ongoing work with participation barriers.

To prevent quality from being reduced to impression, the system needs a unified course and provider registry with common minimum standards. The registry is not just a catalog; it is a "living meter" of quality, where each course has a description of learning outcomes, methods of practical verification, workplace or simulation training availability, and historical outcomes of graduates. Combined with external evaluations and simple audits, it will naturally create an environment where good providers emerge at the forefront, and marketing without substance loses ground. The registry should also be followed by public transparency: publishing aggregated outcomes by profession and region, so that participants and businesses can see where things are going well and where changes are needed.

Another key element in the puzzle is the system's ability to see the demand for skills in real-time. "Skills intelligence" should not be a crude list of occupations with shortages, but a regularly updated image of work tasks, technologies, and safety and quality requirements. From this data, content updates, cohort planning, and decisions are made about which professions require central provision and which can be handled by demand-side mechanisms through individual accounts. It is also meaningful to link these to qualification standards and occupational profiles to prevent the creation of parallel worlds between what is taught and what is recognized.

**OPERATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION MAP**

While the previous sections of the article showed the “why” and “what,” we now focus on the “how.” Implementing a portfolio that combines demand-side tools with centrally organized programs and relies on result-based agreements requires precise choreography. A one-off decision about the budget is not enough; a sequence of steps is needed in which content, capacity, data, partnerships, and communication move simultaneously. If these can be kept in sync, the system will stop generating “projects” and start producing stable results.

Management and Responsibilities: Who is the "Owner" of What?

At the beginning, clear management architecture is required. Instead of dispersed decisions and parallel initiatives, implementation must have one "owner" at the Ministry of Laboure level responsible for coordination and outcomes, and one "partner" at the Ministry of Education level, ensuring the connection to the curricular side, practice centers, and qualification standards. On their shared table are three key maps: the map of professions and work tasks to be covered by modular courses; the map of providers and training workplaces with which result-based agreements are made; and the map of regional priorities, which decides where capacities will expand and where demand can be redirected through individual accounts. In this model, public employment services act as coordinators "on the ground" – they know employers and job seekers, can align start dates, and support participants in the first weeks of work. Schools and training centers act as curators of methodology and quality; employers are the guarantors of reality, as they define work tasks, tolerances, and safety frameworks. These divided roles do not take away anyone's competencies but sharpen them: everyone knows what they need to deliver and how it will be measured.

**PILOT – CALIBRATION ON A SMALL SCALE BEFORE FULL IMPLEMENTATION**

Before the new model is scaled, it is necessary to conduct a "trial season" in different conditions. A meaningful composition of pilots includes at least three regions: an urban area with a high concentration of jobs and providers, an industrial region with strong manufacturing, and a peripheral region with sparse infrastructure. In each of them, two or three professions of varying difficulty will be tested-such as logistics and entry-level manufacturing roles, machine setup or quality control, and a

selected service profession. The pilot has clear milestones: defining competency maps and modules, selecting providers according to minimum standards, preparing training workplaces, recruiting cohorts, ongoing measurement, and comparing results. After the first two cohorts, the content and exams will be calibrated-not based on feelings but on the time to reach the standard, error rates during the ramp-up, and retention after three and six months. Thanks to the pilot, details that often determine success will also be adjusted: schedules for adults, transportation logistics, mentoring formats, or how digital micro-skills are integrated into practical modules.

**REGISTER AND DATA: FROM CATALOG TO LIVING QUALITY MEASURE**

Without a reliable data layer, even good design remains blind. The course and provider registry should not just be a list of names; it is a "living meter" of quality. Each module carries three types of information: a description of the work tasks and learning outcomes it covers; the method of practical verification, including exams or observations in real operations; and the history of graduate results-placement, retention, and, where appropriate, wage dynamics. These data are updated at regular intervals and are comparable across regions and professions. Employment services and providers have a simple interface for entering and checking data, while schools and training centers exchange methodological improvements and calibration notes through the registry. In the background, a small analytical team ensures the integrity of the data, revealing inconsistencies and issuing quarterly summaries-not as a bureaucratic ritual, but as a working tool for adjusting content and capacity. The publicly available part of the registry serves participants and companies: they can see what is being taught, the learning outcomes, and overall success rates. Transparency here is not the end goal; it is a tool that pushes the market towards quality.

**RESULT-BASED CONTRACTS: A FAIR GAME FOR ALL**

To turn public money into results, the philosophy of contracts must also change. Instead of payments for hours or "headcounts," we direct support where placement and retention are proven. The provider and their corporate partners sign an agreement that outlines the course content, the method of the exam, and expected metrics after placement. The contract also respects the difficulty of the profession and region-the bar is the same in principle, but success thresholds may vary slightly based on objective conditions. The bonus-malus system is simple and predictable: above-average results mean better placement in the registry and quicker access to further cohorts, while repeated underperformance leads to a corrective plan or temporary suspension of support. The goal is not to punish but to maintain fair rules that protect both the participant and the employer from low-quality outcomes. Contracts also include a minimum level of "soft landing" after placement-short mentoring and accessible contact to reduce the risk of early departure during the most critical period.

**CAPACITY AND METHODOLOGY: WHO TEACHES AND WHAT THEY TEACH**

Content and data are not enough without people and workplaces capable of teaching "for real." Therefore, implementation involves a dual capacity boost. On the people side, it involves building a core group of instructors and trainers who master adult education didactics, can work with heterogeneous groups, and have direct experience with the workplace for which they are preparing. Instructor rotation between regions and joint exams maintain a unified standard. On the infrastructure side, training workplaces are built or modernized-at schools, regional centers, and industry partners-to simulate real conditions: the same types of equipment, the same work instructions, and the same safety protocols. In each region, a "hub" is created to coordinate cohort schedules, share equipment, and facilitate agreed-upon internships directly in operations. The same module thus appears credible, whether it is implemented in the regional capital or in a smaller district center.

**INCLUSION AND ACCOMPANYING SERVICES: SMALL INVESTMENTS, BIG IMPACT**

The operational plan also includes a thin but solid layer of support that addresses participation and onboarding barriers. Every course includes a minimum "network": options to adjust schedules for adults, short digital drills integrated directly into practical modules, contact for questions, and simple mobility support where distance threatens to be a barrier. For disadvantaged groups, mentoring during the first weeks of work is added, and, if necessary, coordination with providers of social and health services. These will not create expensive programs; on the contrary, these small investments best protect the main investment in content and training.

## COMMUNICATION AND CHANGE: ENSURING THE SYSTEM KNOWS WHAT IS CHANGING AND WHY

Every change requires explanation not only in presentations but also in the everyday language of the people working in the system. Therefore, implementation includes a simple communication plan: explaining to participants what learning outcomes mean and why they are tested "as in work"; providing clear guidelines and examples of good practice to providers; showing employers how their feedback is reflected in the content and how the onboarding process can be planned sensibly. Communication also maintains realistic expectations- the goal is not to "solve" the labor market but to transform part of today's training into reliable bridges to work and maintain their quality over time.

## BUDGET AND TIMELINE: REALLOCATION INSTEAD OF EXPANSION

Financing is based on the principle of reallocation, not expansion at all costs. Some funds are shifted from passive, hard-to-measure expenditures to content quality, external evaluation, the registry, and brief post-placement mentoring. The timeline includes a zero year for preparation (competency maps, provider selection, adjustments to training workplaces), a year of pilots and the first annual calibration, followed by expansion where the data confirm return on investment. In every phase, a simple rule is followed: measure first, then expand.

Operational Implementation Map in this form is not a "big leap" proposal, but rather a precise breakdown of small, disciplined steps. Each of them has its reason: the management architecture maintains accountability, the pilot protects against costly mistakes, the registry and result-based contracts give quality players space and weak ones a mirror, capacities and methodology turn content into reality, and the thin layer of inclusion maintains the investment in the most fragile period. If this order is maintained, even the seemingly abstract slogan "skills for work" will take on a concrete form: in every region, there will be modules taught on equipment like that used on shifts, with exams that simulate the first week of work, and they will conclude with an agreed transition into employment. At that point, it will be clear that we have moved beyond words and into everyday practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Analysis of Demand-Side Tools and Centrally Organized Programs

The analysis showed that demand-side tools and centrally organized programs are not alternatives, but complements. The former brings speed, accessibility, and autonomy for adult participants, while the latter maintain a unified standard in professions where errors are critical in terms of quality, safety, or reputation. The combined model works when both paradigms share the same quality rules: clear learning outcomes, practical verification, transition into work, and accountability for retention. Where this "common grammar" is established, it doesn't matter whether someone gained the skill through an individual account or a central program-the important thing is that they can safely and reliably perform the task where the economy needs it.

### Structural Challenges of the Slovak Labor Market

The structural challenges of the Slovak labor market-demographics, regional disparities, qualification mismatch, and increasing demands for digital skills, quality, and safety-shift the focus from quantity to quality and from declarations to evidence. The demographic decline in the workforce is, in this sense, a paradoxical opportunity: it forces us to shorten transitions, strengthen measurement, and concentrate public resources on interventions that demonstrably lead to productivity, wages, and team stability. If we manage to maintain discipline in the small things-describing work tasks, designing exams that mimic the first week of work, brief mentoring after placement-we will gain a return on investment that no “big reform” can deliver by itself.

### Key Elements: Data Layer and Course Registry

A key element is the data layer. The course and provider registry with common minimum standards and transparent results is not a bureaucratic add-on, but the backbone of trust. It creates a fair environment where quality naturally and quickly prevails. Equally important is maintaining an annual rhythm of content calibration based on feedback from operations-technology changes faster than curricula, and only regular content updates will prevent good modules from becoming nice but outdated documents.

### Inclusion

Inclusion plays a special role. A policy that combines training with mentoring, short trial work, and

accompanying services is not an "extra social program" but an insurance for the return on public investment. The first weeks at work are critical for retention and, thus, for whether the investment in skills transforms into stable performance and wage premiums. When participation barriers-transportation, childcare, digital skills-are addressed in advance and systematically, the risk of premature departures decreases across all groups, not just "hard cases."

**Limits of the Proposed Approach**

The limits of the proposed approach-heterogeneity of regions and providers, the risk of ranking without context, budget cyclicality, and project fatigue-are real. They can only be tackled through routine: pilots in different conditions, instructor rotation and joint exams, leveling the playing field in peripheral regions, and robust yet simple result-based contracts that share risks and reward real impact. A system built on people and workplaces will survive political cycles only if its "fixed points"standards, registry, methodologies, training workplace remain neutral and useful for everyone who uses them.

**Practical Message**

The practical message of this text is modest yet challenging. It doesn't require exceptional budgets or revolutionary declarations; it requires a proper sequence of steps that begin at the workplace, move to the course, and return with evidence. If these steps can be maintained in sync, the portfolio of active labor market policies will stop being a mix of good intentions and will become an investment plan with clear returns: fewer mistakes and faster ramp-ups in operations, more stable jobs, better wage premiums, and smaller regional disparities.

**Looking Towards 2030-2035**

Looking towards 2030–2035, we are not faced with the question of whether we need "more training," but whether we can teach in such a way that it is reflected in the result on Monday morning. Where skills policy moves from a discussion about tools to discipline in execution-first the task, then the module; first the proof, then the certificate; first retention, then celebrations-human capital will stop being measured by paper and will begin to be measured by work. And this is where the connection between the individual, the labor market, and public policy is most crucial.

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**Contacte / Contacts / Контакты:**

**Antonín KORAUŠ,**
Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava,
Sklabinská 1, 83517 Bratislava, Slovakia
**E-mail:** antonin.koraus@akademiapz.sk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2384-9106

**Ľuboš LITTERA,**
Economic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Šancová 56, 81105 Bratislava, Slovakia
**E-mail:** lubos.littera@minv.sk
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3239-2270

**Patrik KRAUSPE,**
Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava,
Sklabinská 1, 83517 Bratislava, Slovakia
**E-mail:** patrik.krauspe@akademiapz.sk
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1070-6946

**Peter IHNATIŠIN**,
Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava,
Sklabinská 1, 83517 Bratislava, Slovakia
**E-mail:** peter.ihnatisin@akademiapz.sk
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4355-2576

**Patrik JAVORČÍK,**
Faculty of Management, University of Prešov in Prešov,
Konštantinova 16, 08001 Prešov, Slovakia.
**E-mail:** patrik.javorcik@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5465-1325