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The European Training Foundation Framework for Skills Governance

THE EU AGENCY SUPPORTING COUNTRIES TO DEVELOP THROUGH LEARNING

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PREFACE

Making skills systems more effective has become a priority for countries around the globe. This reflects the need to modernise economies and labour markets, strengthen competitiveness, respond to demographic change and address other economic and social pressures. At the same time, the demands placed on skills systems are expanding. They need, for example, to support the portability of qualifications, facilitate labour mobility, scale up adult learning provision, and adapt to the growing impact of artificial intelligence on the landscape of skills needs. Together, these developments make skills systems more complex and more demanding to govern.

A key to making skills systems more effective is their approach to governance. Governance of skills systems is a concept that is often understood in different ways and is not easily captured for the purpose of policy advice. The European Training Foundation (ETF) has long recognised the importance of effective governance and has invested substantially in the production of knowledge and advice to support its improvement. Over the years, this work has proved useful in a wide range of country contexts. The time had nevertheless come to take stock of available products and the ETF's approach to this complex subject, and to engage in an in-depth discussion within the organisation to clarify and articulate its understanding of skills governance. This reflection also comes as the European Union and international skills policy increasingly recognise the importance of governance.

The objective was to unpack the concept of skills governance in such a way that it could be better understood and translated into concrete policy action. This entailed an analysis of recent academic literature as well as European Union and international policy guidance. To ensure that the framework was aligned with the thinking of key ETF partner institutions and relevant to the needs and perspectives of partner countries, the ETF established a steering group of experts from key partner organisations and organised successive rounds of consultation with experts from ETF partner countries. The steering group provided strategic advice and feedback on the framework's conceptual development, while the country consultations helped test its relevance, clarify its practical implications and shape its findings and recommendations.

The results of this extensive process of reflection and exchange are set out in this report. We hope that our conceptualisation of skills governance will be helpful for policymakers and skills development stakeholders in ETF partner countries by stimulating constructive discussions, helping to identify opportunities for better alignment across governance dimensions and, ultimately, supporting improvements in the way skills systems are governed.

The framework will guide the ETF's policy dialogue and support to partner countries, providing a common language and analytical basis for examining governance arrangements and identifying opportunities for improvement.

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These insights grounded the framework in diverse national contexts and significantly enhanced its relevance, practical value and overall quality.

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1. Why skills governance remains a recurring challenge

More than ever, countries across Europe and beyond are focusing on skills. They are modernising vocational education and training, expanding lifelong learning, strengthening apprenticeships, developing qualifications frameworks, investing in digital skills and responding to the opportunities and challenges created by the green transition. Skills are central to debates on competitiveness, strategic autonomy and economic resilience, reflected most visibly in the European Union's Union of Skills strategy. Across these diverse policy agendas, one message has become clear: improving the outcome of skills policies depends, in part, on how those policies are designed and governed (European Commission, 2016; European Commission, 2020; European Commission, 2025).

Governance is a widely used but also much-contested concept. Traditionally, it has often been equated with “steering or regulating” (Fukuyama, 2016). Yet contemporary approaches to public governance encompass a wider range of mechanisms, including hierarchical authority, horizontal coordination, markets, networks, values, incentives and societal involvement (Torfing et al., 2020). Thus, in skills policy, governance should not be understood solely as hierarchical state control, but also as interaction between the actors that have a stake in the policy. Governance encompasses a combination of hierarchical, bureaucratic, market-based, network, and partnership-based mechanisms through which public and private actors, social partners, and civil society actors interdependently participate in the formulation and implementation of skills policy (ETF, 2020a; Markowitsch et al., 2024).

Recent work by Cedefop, the European Commission, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the OECD and UNESCO increasingly recognises governance as an enabling condition for effective skills systems, rather than an isolated priority. Although these organisations use different concepts and analytical approaches, they converge on a common message: countries are more likely to achieve better skills outcomes when policies are coherent, institutions cooperate effectively, stakeholders share ownership of reforms, financing supports policy priorities, and evidence is systematically used to improve decision-making (Cedefop, 2017; ILO, 2026; OECD, 2019; OECD, 2020; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022; World Bank, UNESCO, and ILO, 2023). Most recently, the European Commission’s “Union of Skills”, drawing from the Draghi, Letta and Niinistö reports (Draghi, 2024; Letta, 2024; Niinistö, 2024), identified “fragmented and inefficient governance” as one of the key challenges hampering the EU’s competitiveness. It emphasises the need to ensure that governance arrangements work together, with a common strategic direction.

Over the last decade, ETF partner countries have embarked on substantive reform programmes, but experience shows that governance-related challenges are often underestimated in the reform process. Fragmented institutional responsibilities, weak labour-market information, limited cross-ministry coordination, and constrained financing are interlinked and, if not addressed, may further exacerbate each other. At the same time, few countries lack reform ideas. On the contrary, many are pursuing ambitious programmes related to youth employment, Centres of Vocational Excellence, validation of non-formal and informal learning, individual learning accounts, micro-credentials, work-based learning, adult learning and others. The greater challenge is ensuring that these initiatives reinforce, rather than compete, with one another. New reforms are frequently introduced before earlier reforms have fully taken effect. This may result in reform congestion, which arises when the number, pace and interdependence of reforms exceed the capacity of institutions and stakeholders to plan strategically, prioritise, design, coordinate, finance, implement and learn from them effectively (ETF, 2026).

This report builds on decades of ETF experience in supporting skills system reforms, combined with insights from international research and policy practice. It does not seek to replace existing governance frameworks or propose a new model of how countries should organise their skills systems. Nor does it suggest that the five governance dimensions presented later in the report capture every aspect of skills governance. Rather, the report offers a practical framework for structuring

reflection on areas where governance matters most. Its purpose is to draw governments' and stakeholders' attention to how different governance arrangements interact, where bottlenecks emerge and how greater alignment of governance arrangements can strengthen the performance of the skills system.

Box 1. Key concepts used in this report

Key concepts used in this report

Skills system. The actors, institutions, policies and processes through which skills are developed and used. It spans initial and continuing vocational education and training, adult and lifelong learning, active labour market policies, general education and higher education.

Skills governance. The mechanisms – including administration, markets and networks – through which public authorities, private actors, social partners and civil society interdependently participate in the formulation and implementation of skills policy.

Governance dimensions. The five analytical foci used by the ETF Framework: vision building and policy design; institutions and legal frameworks; financing arrangements; social partnership and stakeholder engagement; and data generation, analysis and use. They are separated for analytical purposes but are interdependent in practice.

Governance arrangements. The country-specific mechanisms, institutions and practices observed through the five dimensions. The dimensions provide the analytical lens; governance arrangements are the empirical reality in a particular context.

Governance-as-alignment. A reflective perspective that examines whether governance arrangements are oriented towards a shared policy vision (strategic alignment), reinforce one another across the five dimensions (mutual alignment), and are reviewed and adapted over time to support implementation and intended outcomes (adaptive alignment).

Governance capacity. The collective ability of institutions and stakeholders, supported by appropriate mandates, decision-making authority, leadership, skills, staffing, resources, organisational processes and coordination mechanisms, to align governance arrangements and translate policy ambitions into implementation.

Source: Authors, adapted from Markowitsch et al. (2024), OECD (2019), ILO (2021b) and ETF (2020b).

The central argument of this report is straightforward. Governance arrangements create important conditions that determine whether strategic ambitions are converted into implementation outcomes. They create incentives for institutions to work towards common objectives, link financing to policy priorities, enable stakeholders to shape reforms and contribute meaningfully to their implementation, and ensure that evidence informs continuous improvement. In other words, governance arrangements create the conditions for maintaining the direction of a policy vision and attaining the intended policy outcomes. The five dimensions were selected as interdependent areas in which governance arrangements most directly influence the conversion of policy vision in implementation and outcomes.

2. Governing skills systems: old and new challenges

Throughout life people learn in various ways through formal, non-formal and informal learning - and in various places including school, vocational education and training, higher education, workplaces, communities and online environments. These diverse learning settings involve a wide range of actors.

Governing the relationships between them requires public authority, as well as cooperation between organisations and coordination between policy domains. Responsibility for skills development extends to education, employment, economic development, industrial policy, innovation and social inclusion (OECD, 2021b; ILO, 2026; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022; European Commission, 2026). Policies developed in one domain may therefore depend on decisions made and actions taken in others. Ensuring coherence across policy domains is therefore a recurring governance challenge.

2.1 Reform is becoming more complex

Countries often implement several reforms for skills development simultaneously in response to changing economic, social, technological and environmental conditions. These may concern qualifications, adult learning, skills intelligence or the digital and green transitions. Each reform may have different goals and rationales, concern different institutions for implementation, draw on different sources of financing, and involve particular sets of stakeholders.

Viewed individually, these reforms may seem necessary and make sense. Taken together, however, as described in Chapter 1, they might create reform congestion, originating at the strategic planning stage when priorities proliferate without a clear hierarchy, defined responsibilities, realistic budgets or delivery arrangements. Donor-supported programmes and pilot projects operating in parallel with limited national anchoring can compound congestion. A ‘portfolio perspective’ is needed to offset this, which should consist of the following components: mapping reforms and their dependencies, prioritising them against agreed criteria, sequencing them around prerequisites and implementation readiness, and using evidence to accelerate, redesign, merge, pause or stop initiatives (ETF, 2026).

This challenge is particularly relevant for countries that are simultaneously pursuing reforms related to EU accession, economic transformation, labour market modernisation, lifelong learning as a right for all, and integration into global value chains. Their urgency and interdependencies need to inform decisions on sequencing, coordination and sustained implementation.

2.2 More actors have interdependent roles and responsibilities

Modern skills systems involve a wide range of actors. Ministries of education continue to play a central role, but responsibilities increasingly extend to ministries of labour, economy, finance, regional development and social affairs. Public employment services, qualifications authorities, regional governments, education and training providers, employers, social partners, chambers of commerce, civil society organisations and international partners all contribute to different aspects of skills development.

This diversity brings significant benefits. It allows policies to identify and respond more effectively to changing labour market needs, regional economic priorities and the diverse needs of learners (OECD, 2023). At the same time, it also creates new governance challenges. Different organisations have their own mandates and planning cycles. They often pursue complementary, but not identical, objectives. Without effective governance, these differences can result in fragmented decision-making, duplication of effort or conflicting goals.

Governance arrangements need to enable these actors to work towards shared objectives while recognising their different responsibilities and interests.

2.3 Effective skills governance supports complex reforms

In complex skills systems, problems are interconnected and rarely confined to a single governance arrangement. For example, weak employer engagement may result from ineffective stakeholder-engagement mechanisms, unclear institutional responsibilities, insufficient financial incentives or limited experience in using labour market information. Similarly, low participation in adult learning may require additional funding, but financing alone may not suffice if stakeholder responsibilities are unclear, action plans lack targets and a timeframe, learning opportunities do not match the needs of learners and employers, or available data are not used to identify barriers to participation and adapt provision.

These examples illustrate a central feature of effective skills governance: the performance of skills systems depends not only on the quality of individual governance arrangements but also on the coherence of the relationships between them. Governance challenges are therefore often systemic.

2.4 A central governance challenge: alignment

Alignment concerns whether different governance arrangements reinforce one another in pursuit of shared objectives.

This report addresses this challenge through a **governance-as-alignment perspective**. It does not prescribe a uniform governance model or centralised control. Rather, it concerns whether country-specific governance arrangements reinforce one another and collectively convert a policy vision into implementation and intended outcomes. Alignment combines three interlinked aspects: *strategic alignment*, meaning that governance arrangements are oriented towards a shared policy vision; *mutual alignment*, meaning that mandates, resources, stakeholder arrangements, and information systems reinforce rather than undercut one another; and *adaptive alignment*, meaning that arrangements are monitored, reviewed and adjusted over time so that implementation delivers the intended outcomes. Alignment is hence not an end in itself: it must support a legitimate, evidence-informed and inclusive policy vision and contribute to intended outcomes. A shared direction may itself evolve through debate and negotiation. Alignment should allow stakeholders to pursue initiatives and express legitimate differences over policy priorities and influence how those priorities are pursued.

Chapter 3 presents the five dimensions of the **ETF Framework for Skills Governance** and the questions that can help identify bottlenecks in policy design and implementation.

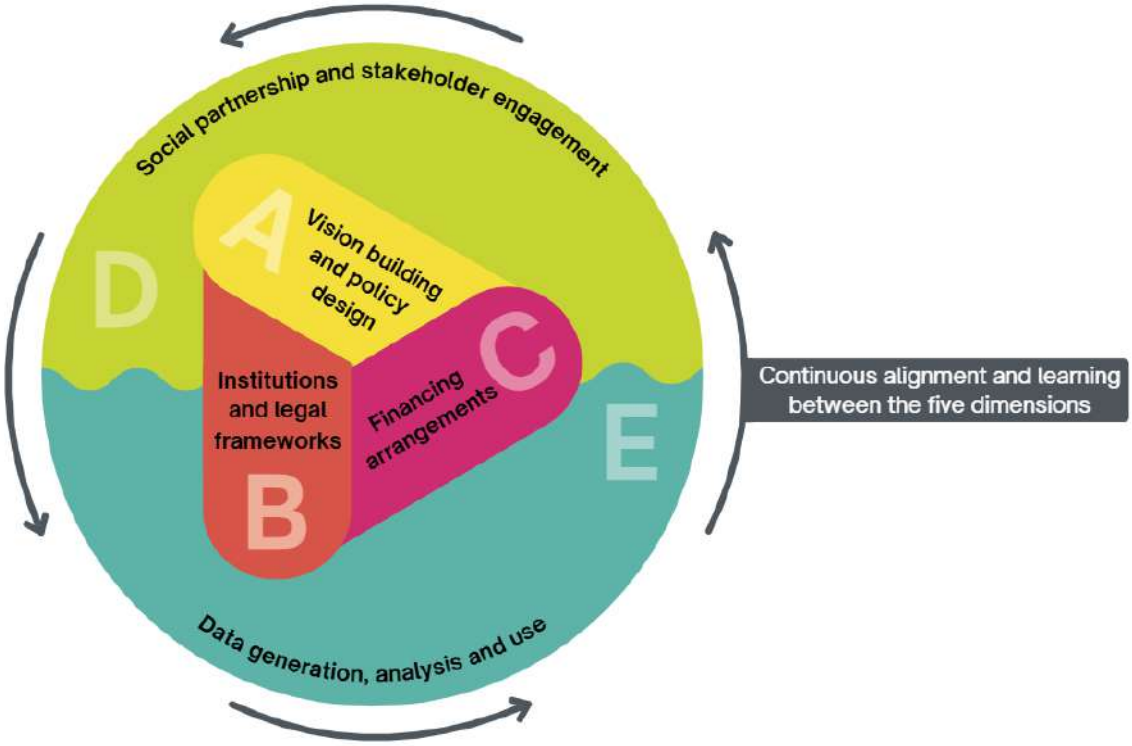
3. The ETF Framework for Skills Governance

The ETF Framework for Skills Governance provides a practical structure for examining how public skills systems are governed. It does not prescribe how countries should organise their governance arrangements, nor does it propose a single model of good governance. Countries differ considerably in their constitutional arrangements, administrative traditions and labour market institutions. Effective governance therefore takes different institutional forms.

Instead, the framework focuses on something that all countries have in common: every skills system requires governance arrangements that provide direction, organise implementation, mobilise resources, engage stakeholders and enable continuous learning. The effectiveness of these arrangements depends not only on the quality of their individual components but also on the extent to which they reinforce one another.

The framework offers a common language for discussing skills governance, an analytical lens for identifying governance bottlenecks and a practical basis in support of policy dialogue and reform. It draws on the most relevant academic and applied governance frameworks, previous ETF work and recent EU policy developments relevant to skills governance in ETF partner countries[1]. It does not compete with existing frameworks, but consolidates and builds on them.

Figure 1. The ETF Framework for Skills Governance



[1] Among the key frameworks developed by international and EU agencies are the OECD's Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems Framework (OECD, 2020), Cedefop's skills governance framework with a focus on skills intelligence (Cedefop, 2017), Cedefop's governance equalizer with a focus on apprenticeships (Cedefop, 2016), the ETF's VET Governance Inventory Methodological Tool (2020b), and the ETF's VET Governance Toolkit (2020a). The frameworks address many similar governance dimensions and issues, although these are sometimes described or grouped differently, and some are treated at different levels of granularity.

The framework identifies **five governance dimensions**, reflecting the thematic areas in which governance matters most for converting a policy vision into intended outcomes:

- Vision building and policy design
- Institutions and legal frameworks
- Financing arrangements
- Social partnership and stakeholder engagement
- Data generation, analysis and use

These five dimensions encompass governance-related priorities highlighted in recent EU skills and VET policy, notably the Union of Skills (European Commission, 2025) and the European VET Strategy (European Commission, 2026): establishing a common vision and strategic direction; strengthening coordination across institutions with dispersed responsibilities; involving relevant stakeholders, including social partners, the private sector, and education and training institutions; aligning public and private investment with identified priorities; and consolidating skills intelligence to anticipate and respond to future skills demand and supply.

None of the dimensions operates in isolation. Together they create the conditions under which policies can be successfully implemented and produce the intended outcomes.

At the centre of the framework lies **alignment**. As explained in Chapter 2, governance-as-alignment examines whether arrangements are oriented towards a shared policy vision, reinforce one another across the five dimensions, and are reviewed and adapted over time in light of implementation experience and changing conditions.

When governance arrangements are aligned, the policy vision is reflected in institutional mandates, financing creates supportive incentives, social partners and other stakeholders contribute meaningfully, and data are generated, analysed and used for accountability and learning. When these arrangements pull in different directions, reforms may struggle even where the underlying policy rationale and proposed measures are sound.

The following sections explain each governance dimension and illustrate how it contributes to effective skills governance. The framework can be applied at two interconnected levels. At the system level, it can support reflection on the overall governance architecture of the skills system. At the reform or policy level, it can assess whether the governance arrangements required to achieve a specific objective are sufficiently aligned. Each application should therefore clearly define its unit of analysis and intended outcomes. At either level, the dimensions have important implications for the meso-level (e.g. organisations and training providers) and the micro-level (e.g. employers and individuals), shaping incentives, opportunities and decision-making across the entire skills system.

3.1 Vision building and policy design

3.1.1 Every skills system needs a clear sense of direction

The development of a strategy or reform should begin with an assessment of the current situation and a vision of the desired future state. This means identifying the problems to be addressed and clarifying how the performance of the skills system needs to change. Depending on the context, this may concern skills mismatches, low productivity, limited access, inequity, weak labour market transitions or fragmented lifelong learning pathways.

A key consideration is whether a problem can be addressed within a particular area of policy or depends on coordinated action involving different parts of the skills system. In some cases, an individual policy instrument with concrete short- to medium-term objectives may be sufficient. In others, a broader strategy may be needed to bring together several policy instruments and actors

around shared objectives. The challenge of aligning governance dimensions across policy domains therefore arises already when the vision is defined and the policy response is designed.

Vision building and policy design can be supported by approaches such as the Rapid Education Diagnosis methodology, which can provide evidence on the problems to be addressed and their underlying causes (ETF, 2018e, 2023). A broader framework for evidence-informed policy design is provided by the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines. Beyond the analysis of problems and the definition of objectives, they emphasise consideration of alternative policy options and assessment of their potential impacts (European Commission, 2021).

Participatory processes for vision building can create a common understanding of the challenges, improve coordination, prioritise reforms, reduce duplication, increase complementarity between policy measures and identify mutually reinforcing actions (Unterweger and Steinheimer, 2025). Skills foresight can complement this analysis by bringing together stakeholders and combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, integrating long-term perspectives and addressing uncertainty about future skill demands (Cedefop, 2021; ETF, Cedefop, and ILO, 2016a).

Without a shared policy vision, governance arrangements can become fragmented: institutions pursue different priorities, reforms evolve independently, and implementation becomes increasingly difficult. Vision building and policy design therefore provide a first reference point against which the other governance dimensions can be aligned.

However, a shared vision does not imply that all actors have the same priorities, interests or needs. Employers and workers, ministries and providers, or different parts of government may view the problems to be addressed and the desired outcomes from different perspectives. These differences may complement each other, but they may also give rise to tensions and competing priorities. An important part of vision building is therefore to make these differences visible and provide space for them to be discussed and negotiated.

Governments and the other actors involved in shaping skills policy can use the following questions to examine the direction of reform and their respective contributions. The questions provide a starting point for such a dialogue; the country context and the reform under discussion may call for additional questions.

- Is there an agreed long-term direction for the skills system?
- Are reform priorities based on evidence and an assessment of expected effects, feasibility, costs and risks?
- Are policy objectives coherent across government and related policy domains?
- Does vision-building involve the stakeholders relevant to the reform?
- Do different reforms reinforce one another?
- Are strategic priorities translated into feasible implementation arrangements, with clear sequencing, responsibilities, resources, milestones and monitoring?
- Is there a clear hierarchy among reform priorities and explicit criteria for starting, scaling, merging, pausing or discontinuing initiatives?

3.2 Institutions and legal frameworks

3.2.1 Strategies require institutions and legal frameworks that can translate ambition into action

Modern skills systems involve many organisations operating across different sectors and levels of government. Legal frameworks define and recognise different educational sectors and forms of learning (OECD, 2019; ETF, 2012a) and, in turn, assign regulatory responsibilities for these to different institutions. Ministries, agencies, regional authorities, education providers, employers and social partners each perform different functions, and the decision-making autonomy of these actors varies considerably across countries. In addition, international and supranational institutions, including the EU and donor countries, influence policy-making by promoting policies and setting joint targets (ETF, 2012a; Arribas, 2016).

This split of responsibilities potentially contributes to gaps in provision and/or overlaps of support (OECD, 2020). In countries receiving substantial external support, donor-supported programmes and pilot initiatives may operate in parallel, creating overlaps, competing implementation demands and weak sustainability when they are not anchored in nationally owned priorities, budgets and institutions.

Ministries, public agencies, regional authorities and other actors with governance responsibilities can use the following questions to examine mandates, coordination and how formal arrangements work in practice. The discussion should consider both formal responsibilities and the scope actors have to take initiative, resolve overlaps or propose changes to existing arrangements.

- Do institutional mandates reflect strategic priorities and allow adjustment when those priorities change?
- Are roles and responsibilities clear and complementary in relation to the strategy or reform?
- Are coordination mechanisms in place and do they function effectively?
- Are externally supported programmes aligned with nationally owned priorities, budgets and institutions, with realistic pathways to scale, transfer, adapt or close after external support ends?

3.3 Financing arrangements

3.3.1 Funding determines far more than the resources available for education and training

It also shapes behaviour throughout the skills system. Decisions on how resources are mobilised and allocated to specific activities create incentives for providers, employers and individuals, consequently affecting participation in learning and determining whether policy ambitions can be translated into practice (ETF, 2018b).

Resource mobilisation concerns how resources for a specific reform or the overall skills system are raised. Skills systems are usually financed jointly by the state, individuals and employers, although their respective contributions vary widely across countries and educational sectors (Cedefop, 2016; OECD, 2019). Public resources may come from national or subnational budgets, social security contributions, EU funds or international donors. Alongside public funding, employers and individuals may contribute to the financing of skills development through a range of mechanisms, including levy-based training funds, direct investment by employers in workforce training, and individual contributions to learning costs (ILO, 2021a; Cedefop, n.d.).

Resource allocation concerns how these resources are distributed. Funding may be provided directly to education and training institutions through funding formulas or public procurement. It may also be allocated to individuals or employers through grants, vouchers, loans, tax incentives or other subsidies, reducing the direct and indirect costs of participation, including fees and productivity loss (Ziderman, 2018; Cedefop, n.d.).

The framework encourages countries to look beyond funding levels. It requires clarity about who pays for what, the resulting incentives, whether the distribution of costs reflects strategic priorities and whether resources are allocated to areas where gaps have been identified.

Governments, funding bodies, social partners and providers can use the following questions to examine how financing decisions support the agreed priorities and sustainable implementation. Actors who contribute resources or depend on funding should be able to raise concerns about costs, incentives and continuity, and propose alternatives where current arrangements have a constraining effect.

- Are the reform's financial and non-financial costs estimated, with funding sources and responsibilities identified?
- Are sufficient and diversified resources mobilised by the state, individuals, employers and other sources?
- Are resources allocated in line with strategic priorities and identified funding gaps?
- Do mobilisation and allocation mechanisms reward desired outcomes (e.g. quality, inclusion, employer engagement)?
- Are financing streams (e.g. domestic and donor funding) coordinated rather than overlapping or parallel competing initiatives?
- Where external funding is used, are responsibilities for continuing provision and the arrangements for transition, scaling or closure clear?
- Are recurrent and post-project costs reflected in medium-term budgets?

3.4 Social partnership and stakeholder engagement

3.4.1 Skills systems are built on partnership

Governments cannot effectively govern skills systems alone. Social partners, comprising employers' and workers' organisations, understand changing labour market needs, contribute expert knowledge and negotiate with regard to the interests they represent. Providers translate policy into learning opportunities. Civil society organisations help ensure that reforms remain inclusive and tailored to the needs of those most in need of support (OECD, 2020; ETF, 2012b; ETF, 2019). They are all legitimate actors in the broad skills systems referred to in this paper, with roles and responsibilities requiring acknowledgement and, over time, institutionalisation. Their role should extend beyond consultation on government proposals to comprise the articulation of independent positions on existing and proposed policies, as well as their own initiatives for policy proposals or measures.

Social partners are involved, to varying extents across countries, in the governance of skills systems, ranging from training administration and standardisation to reform and provision (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012). They may be represented in consultative functions in advisory bodies together with other stakeholders or constitute the primary stakeholders in dedicated bipartite bodies (including employers' organisations and trade unions) or tripartite bodies (including employers' organisations, trade unions and government) with real decision-making power (Hogarth et al., 2026; Markowitsch and Hefler, 2018). Civil society organisations are particularly important for identifying the needs of underrepresented groups, improving outreach and providing specialised support, and for supporting skills development not solely in response to labour market needs (ETF, 2024). Moreover, provider associations, teacher and learner representatives and thematic experts can further contribute local knowledge and experience, improve understanding of complex problems and build ownership and commitment.

The forms and intensity of social and civic dialogue reflect the history, institutional traditions and wider context of each country. Developing more mature forms of dialogue is therefore typically a gradual process, as relationships, capacities and mutual trust between actors take time to develop. Once

dialogue evolves beyond basic consultation, engagement can become deeper and more institutionalised. Stakeholders need meaningful opportunities to influence priorities, contribute to policy design and take part in implementation and review. Moving from consultation towards such sustained engagement can substantially strengthen skills governance by enabling different interests and perspectives to be incorporated into decision-making and supporting greater alignment across governance dimensions.

Governments, social partners, providers and civil society can use these questions to examine participation, influence and the treatment of differing views.

- Are key stakeholders involved throughout the policy cycle, and how are their needs and positions considered?
- Do participation mechanisms enable meaningful engagement of social partners and civil society organisations in shaping skills policies?
- Are participation and partnership mechanisms sufficiently institutionalised to ensure regular engagement at strategic and technical levels?
- Who sets the agenda, chairs the process and follows up on decisions?
- Do the participating organisations and representatives have the capacity to contribute effectively?
- How have proposals from other ministries, social partners and civil society organisations influenced decisions? What arrangements help build shared ownership of reforms?

3.5 Data generation, analysis and use

3.5.1 Good governance depends on continuous learning

Skills systems operate in highly dynamic environments. Labour market needs evolve, technologies advance, demographic trends shift, and policy priorities change. Governance arrangements therefore need to support the generation and use of evidence throughout the policy cycle, so that policies can be designed on the basis of sound evidence, progress can be continuously monitored, the effects of policies can be evaluated, and all this learning feeds back into the adaptation of the policies in the next cycle.

The foundations for this vary considerably across countries. Reliable and sufficiently detailed data need to be collected systematically, managed effectively and linked across sources where appropriate (ETF, Cedefop, and ILO, 2016b). Data also need to be transformed into information that is understandable, accessible and relevant to its intended users.

On these foundations, different forms of analysis support distinct governance functions. Monitoring provides regular information on the implementation, outputs and outcomes of policies and reforms. Skills assessments provide evidence on current skills supply and demand, while skills forecasts examine how these may develop in the future and skills foresight explores longer-term perspectives and scenarios (OECD, 2020). Evaluation provides a deeper assessment of strategies, policies, systems or individual policy instruments, including their relevance, effectiveness and effects. Evaluation needs to be considered throughout the policy cycle, as robust assessment of policy effects may require evaluation arrangements, baseline data or comparison groups to be established before implementation begins. Ex-ante assessment can inform policy design by examining the expected effects, feasibility, costs and risks of proposed interventions before decisions are taken. This can be particularly important in candidate countries when substantial policy and legislative changes are required in the process of alignment with the EU acquis.

The value of evidence ultimately depends on its use. Skills intelligence, monitoring and evaluation need to reach the actors involved in shaping, implementing and scrutinising policy and support both accountability and policy learning. Transparency and appropriate access to data, methods and findings can strengthen scrutiny and enable stakeholders to contribute to this learning process. Data

generation, analysis and use thus support adaptive alignment across the governance dimensions by providing evidence on whether governance arrangements are contributing to the intended outcomes and where adjustment may be needed.

Governments, evidence-producing institutions, social partners and other users of evidence can use the following questions to examine how information supports decision-making and continuous improvement.

- Is sufficiently detailed and reliable information on current and future skills supply and demand available and accessible to those who need it?
- Do monitoring arrangements provide timely information on implementation, outputs and outcomes?
- Are evaluation and ex-ante assessment appropriately incorporated into the policy cycle, with arrangements established sufficiently early where robust impact evaluation is required?
- Are evidence and evaluation findings used to inform policy design, implementation, review, and decisions on continuation, adaptation, scaling or discontinuation?
- Are relevant data, methods and findings sufficiently transparent and accessible?
- Are AI-supported methods validated and subject to accountability and human oversight (OECD, 2025)?
- Whose knowledge and experience are missing from the available evidence?

4. Strengthening skills governance in practice

Increasingly, countries recognise and reflect on the relationship between persistent implementation challenges and the governance arrangements in place. However, where difficulties such as overlapping responsibilities, weak institutional coordination, uneven stakeholder engagement, financing arrangements that are inconsistent with strategic priorities, or broader signs of reform congestion persist, they may point to underlying misalignments between governance arrangements that merit closer examination.

4.1 Looking beyond symptoms

4.1.1 The ETF Framework for Skills Governance helps identify governance misalignments that affect implementation

The framework supports reflection on two questions:

- Are there foreseeable misalignments between governance arrangements that could undermine policy implementation?
- Do current governance arrangements support the achievement of a country's declared policy objectives?

Applying the framework makes explicit which governance arrangements are expected to support the intended outcomes and tests those expectations against **implementation experience**.

Figure 2. Governance-as-alignment: connecting context, reform and policy outcomes

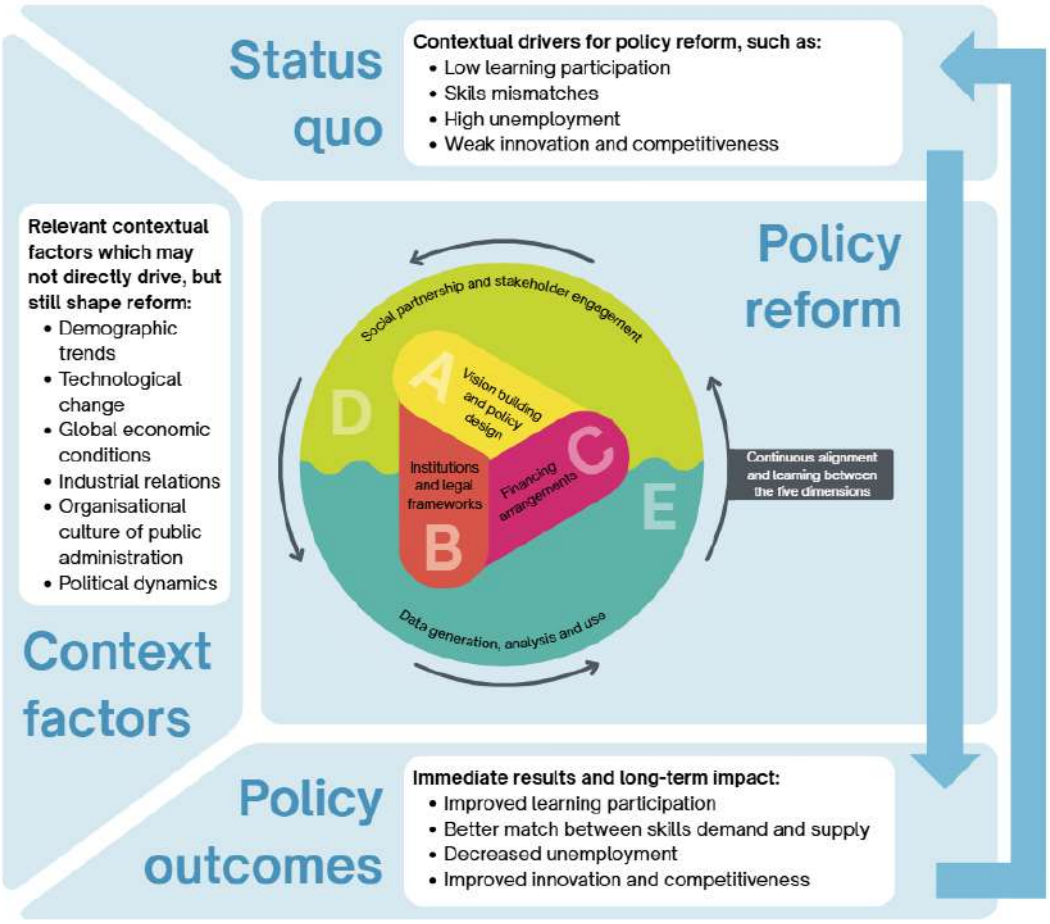


Figure 2 summarises this approach. It illustrates how the governance dimensions align effectively so that a reform process can improve the current status quo and deliver the intended policy outcomes. At the centre of the framework is the relationship between vision building and policy design, institutions and legal frameworks, financing arrangements, social partnership and stakeholder engagement, and data generation, analysis and use. The effectiveness of governance arrangements is reflected in policy outcomes, such as improvements in learning participation, skills levels and broader economic and social impacts.

The relationships between dimensions need particular attention. For example, a mandate to expand adult learning may be difficult to fulfil if providers lack recurrent funding, employers have insufficient opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes, or participation data do not show which groups are being reached.

Assessing skills governance therefore requires looking beyond individual institutions, legal frameworks, financing arrangements and other elements to examine how they function together in practice. This includes whether governance arrangements are strategically, mutually and adaptively aligned and whether actors have the capacities and incentives required to turn policy objectives into effective implementation and progress towards the intended outcomes.

The checklist and working matrix in Chapter 5 can structure this discussion.

4.2 Building governance capacity

4.2.1 Governance capacity depends both on institutions and people

Public administrations, social partners and other stakeholders need the authority, resources and expertise to fulfil their roles. A review should therefore identify both organisational constraints and the support that people need to participate effectively.

Consistent with Box 1, governance capacity includes mandates, decision-making authority, leadership, staffing, resources and working processes, as well as skills and expertise (Baser and Morgan, 2008; Morgan, 2006). In order to align governance arrangements across the five dimensions, the institutions and stakeholders involved collectively need the capacity to:

- build shared understanding around a vision, devise inclusive strategy processes, and communicate policy needs and responses to the wider public;
- clarify roles, assign authority, develop or adapt legal frameworks, establish effective coordination mechanisms and sequence reforms;
- assess how the mobilisation and allocation of resources shape the incentives of key stakeholders and coordinate financing decisions across responsible institutions;
- mobilise the stakeholders whose participation is important to intended outcomes, including employers, providers, learners and social partners, establish effective working relationships among them, and sustain their meaningful participation in policy design and implementation;
- generate and use evidence, support learning, identify implementation gaps and adapt policies and practices accordingly.

4.3 Enabling context-sensitive reform

4.3.1 Governance arrangements need to take into account the context in which a reform takes place.

The governance-as-alignment perspective focuses on what governance arrangements can contribute to achieving desired policy outcomes. These arrangements are necessary but not sufficient by themselves for reform success.

Reforms do not take place on a clean slate. They are embedded in established institutions, practices, actors (Rayner and Howlett, 2009) and many other contextual factors. Some lie outside the realm of governance altogether, such as demographic trends, technological change and global economic conditions. Others, such as organisational culture and industrial relations, may be underestimated in reform design, leading to unrealistic assumptions concerning their malleability. They also largely lie beyond the direct influence of European bodies, such as ETF, and other international and bilateral organisations, particularly in the short to medium term.

For example, UNESCO's lifelong learning handbook emphasises that organisational culture within institutions, not just regulation, shapes outcomes (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). Individual and collective responses such as receptiveness, resistance, emotional reactions, and perceived uncertainty influence whether actors accept or reject a reform effort (Oreg, 2003; Piderit, 2000).

Countries' political economies have been shaped by long-lasting and inherently complex industrial relations arrangements. These have developed gradually over decades or even centuries. Key targets in skills policies, such as increasing individual and employer participation in training, often depend strongly on these arrangements. Without taking these industrial relations arrangements into account, policy reforms may fail or become a long-term endeavour (Barabasch et al., 2021; Li and Pilz, 2023).

Contextual factors must therefore be acknowledged, even where they are largely beyond the reach of deliberate intervention. Governance arrangements may need to be adapted to these conditions to support implementation, informed by country-specific analyses of risks and change enablers.

5. Using the framework and next steps

The framework provides a basis for ETF to connect its existing work and for reflection by countries on their own governance arrangements.

5.1 Connecting ETF's governance work

The following box illustrates the range of ETF's existing tools and networks that partner countries can draw on for system assessment and learning, and how these can be mapped against the framework. Most of these tools and actions address more than one dimension of governance simultaneously.

Table 1. Examples of available ETF tools and actions

ETF governance support: examples of available tools and actions		
Name	**Description and use**	**Governance dimensions addressed (main focus)**
Good multilevel governance framework (ETF, 2013)	**Report, guidance, questionnaire.** Use the questionnaire to examine roles across levels of government and participation in the policy cycle.	A - Vision building and policy design B - Institutions and legal frameworks D - Social partnership and stakeholder engagement
VET and Skills Governance Inventory 4.0 (ETF, 2020b)	**Self-assessment tool to map actors, functions and governance arrangements for seven core governance functions.** Use its data collection framework to establish responsibilities and coordination practices before discussing gaps.	A - Vision building and policy design B - Institutions and legal frameworks C - Financing arrangements D - Social partnership and stakeholder engagement E - Data generation, analysis and use
Country Progress Indicators (ETF, 2017)	**Matrix of qualitative indicators** Use it to document evidence related to shared vision, horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms	A - Vision building and policy design B - Institutions and legal frameworks D - Social partnership and stakeholder engagement E - Data generation, analysis and use
Guide to policy analysis (ETF, 2018e) and Torino Process guidelines (ETF, 2022b)	**Report and practice examples** Use them to apply policy analysis in different stages of the policy cycle.	A - Vision building and policy design D - Social partnership and stakeholder engagement
Financing Prism and financing guidance (ETF, 2018a–d)	**Structures dialogue on raising, allocating and managing resources.** Use it to examine incentives, accountability and the responsibilities attached to funding choices.	B - Institutions and legal frameworks C - Financing arrangements D - Social partnership and stakeholder engagement
Social partnership competence framework (ETF, 2019)	**Identifies the knowledge and competences needed for social partners' governance roles.** Use it to discuss capacity needs and appropriate support.	B - Institutions and legal frameworks D - Social partnership and stakeholder engagement
Public–private partnership typology and cases (ETF, 2020c–d)	**Compares partnership arrangements.** Use the questions and cases to examine how partners share responsibilities, finance, risks and decision-making.	B - Institutions and legal frameworks C - Financing arrangements D - Social partnership and stakeholder engagement
GLAD network (ETF, 2022a)	**Provides a setting for governance learning and dialogue.** Use: Peer exchange can help participants examine experience and discuss possible changes; it is not an assessment instrument.	Potentially all five dimensions, depending on the chosen topic of discussion.

The Framework is the organising lens for considering how existing tools relate to the different governance dimensions and to one another.
Source: Authors, based on the ETF resources cited in the table.

5.2 Applying the framework in country discussions

The matrix below (Table 1) provides an initial structure for discussion rather than a comprehensive diagnostic tool. It can help participants record evidence, differing views and issues for follow-up. It draws on the questions proposed in Chapter 3 and existing ETF governance work. The traffic light approach is intended to facilitate categorisation, but should not be understood as scores for ranking countries or institutions. Where evidence is insufficient, the judgement should be left open, and the missing evidence should be identified. Where the discussion identifies issues requiring deeper analysis, the tools outlined above can provide more specialised approaches.

Table 2. Working matrix for a governance discussion

Dimension or Relationship	Question to test	Status (green, amber, red, grey)	Evidence, date and implications
Vision building and policy design	Are shared priorities translated into a feasible sequence?	-	
Institutions and legal frameworks	Do mandates and authority match delivery responsibilities?	-	
Financing arrangements	Do budgets cover responsibilities and continuing provision?	-	
Social partnership and stakeholder engagement	Who can influence or initiate decisions? Whose voice is missing?	-	
Data generation, analysis and use	Does evidence reach those who can act? What decisions follow?	-	
Relationship between dimensions	Do mandates have matching budgets and staffing? Add other links	-	

GREEN Broadly aligned	AMBER Gaps need attention	RED Major obstacle	GREY Insufficient evidence

5.3 Suggested steps for the use of the working matrix

Participants should agree who convenes the discussion, drawing where possible on existing arrangements. Involve the ministries and agencies concerned, social partners, providers and civil society, including regional or local actors where relevant. Agree how participants can raise their own questions, how disagreements will be recorded and who can decide on follow-up. The steps can be revisited as the discussion develops.

1. Define the scope. Specify the system, policy or reform being examined, the intended outcomes and the decision the review will inform. Identify affected groups and relevant constraints. Record the scope, participants and assessment date.
2. Map the arrangements. List the relevant reforms, institutions, mandates, financing streams, stakeholder arrangements, evidence systems and donor-funded initiatives. For each initiative, record its lead institution, delivery responsibilities, timetable, recurrent costs and dependencies on other decisions or reforms. Check the map with the actors involved.
3. Examine alignment and readiness. Select relevant questions from Chapter 3 and use the working matrix above. Consider strategic, mutual and adaptive alignment as described in Chapter 2. Compare strategies, budgets, mandates and monitoring with stakeholder experience. Distinguish

formal provisions from how they work in practice, and record whose experience is represented or missing. Allow participants to question the agreed vision or suggest alternative approaches.

4. Agree priorities and sequencing. Select a manageable number of issues using criteria agreed by participants, such as consequences for learners, urgency, feasibility and dependencies. Consider continuation, acceleration, adaptation, combination, postponement or closure of initiatives. Record the reasoning, trade-offs and any disagreement.
5. Agree action and responsibility. For each priority, record a short decision: the corrective action, lead institution, authority to decide, resources, prerequisites and milestone.
6. Review progress. Agree a review date linked to implementation milestones or budget decisions. Revisit the evidence, the selected actions and their effects on intended outcomes. Record why a judgement changes, what remains unresolved and how participants will receive feedback. Reopen earlier steps where necessary.

ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CSL	Chambre des salaries (Chamber of Employees)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
EFEE	European Federation of Education Employers
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
ETF	European Training Foundation
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
ETUCE	European Trade Union Committee for Education
EU	European Union
GLAD	Governance Learning, Action and Dialogues
ILO	International Labour Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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